

THE EMPTY LAND
The Search for the Nez Perce
on the Payette National Forest

by
Sheila D. Reddy



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INTRODUCTION

The story and the search for the Nez Perce is a personal one. A few years ago I worked for the Forest Service in the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. As I walked through open ponderosa pine forests, and across the long meadows above the Imnaha and Snake River canyons, I couldn't believe the Indians had left this beautiful country. When I asked, "What tribe was here, where have they gone?" I was told, "The Nez Perce." They had not left voluntarily, but I had no idea how stirring their story would be.

It seemed they were just a breath away as I walked that year through the Forest. I saw groves of peeled ponderosa pines they had used as food (Churchill 1989); Indian Village on Chesnimus Creek with its grinding stones; a pale blue stone knife at a spring named, ironically enough, "Howard's Spring"; I saw the incredible depth of flaked stone at a basalt quarry named "Starvation Springs"; and finally a set of rotting tipi poles tucked inside an ancient shell of a pine just above the trail leading into the Imnaha Canyon.

When I came to the Payette National Forest, the quest for "The People," the Nez Perce, came with me, for I knew we were walking where they had walked, and their memories were still a part of the land.

SOMETHING LOST

"There were fifty non-treaty Nez Perce Indians, not more, arranged as usual; a long rank of men, followed by women and children, with faces painted, the red paint extending back into the partings of the hair,--the men's hair braided and tied up with showy strings,--ornamented in dress, in hats, in blankets, with variegated colors, in leggings of buckskin, and moccasins, beaded and plain; women with bright shawls or blankets, and skirts to the ankle and "top moccasins." All were mounted on Indian ponies as various in color as the dress of the riders. These picturesque people, after keep us waiting long enough for effect, came in sight from up the valley, from the direction of their temporary camp, just above the company gardens. They drew near to the hollow square of the post, just in front of the small company to be interviewed. They struck up their song. They were not armed, except with a few "tomahawk pipes," that could be smoked with the peaceful tobacco, or penetrate the skull-bone of an enemy, at the will of the holder. Yet somehow this wild sound produced a wild effect...It was shrill and searching; sad, like a wail, and yet defiant in its close" (Howard 1881:52).

Even in his animus and hostility Brigadier General O.O. Howard could not help but be impressed with elegance, intelligence and

nobility of the Nez Perce people. That day in May of 1877 an evil, engineered fate was closing around them. Before the year would end, the Nez Perce people who had identified themselves from time immemorial as the remaining Tsoop-nit-palu, the "Walking People," or "The People" (Slickpoo, et al., 1973:iii), would no longer be free. The division of the tribe created by the ignorance of government officials and missionaries, Howard's pursuit of the Nez Perce in 1877, their conquest at Bear Paw, Montana, and the inhumanity of their confinement, has been well documented.

Their lifeway as a people inhabiting central Idaho, northeast Oregon and southeastern Washington, and particularly their use of the area within the Payette National Forest, has had less focus.

"Everything flows, you cannot step twice into the same stream" (Watt 1974:17), however, the memories and the culture of the Nez Perce needs to become an elemental part of the history of the land they walked in, loved, and contains the bones of their ancestors.

HISTORY IN THE DUST

Spinden described the Nez Perce as a tall people, with round heads, clean-cut features, "the finest Indian type...brave, hospitable, and trustworthy." He aligned their characteristics with those of the Navaho, Comanche and the Indians of Southern Oregon (Spinden 1908:238-9). The Nez Perce are part of the language family identified as Sahaptian; this includes the Yakima, Klikitat, Warm Springs, Umatilla, Walla Walla, Wanapam, and Palus speakers (Hunn 1990:364).

It would appear the Nez Perce as a people have been in place for a long time. Archaeological excavations indicate a continuum of occupation at sites within lands the Nez Perce claim to have occupied since "time immemorial" (Slickpoo et al.:iii). An example is the Hatwai site (10NP-143), located near Lewiston on the north bank of the Clearwater River, containing artifacts from the Windust assemblage (dated to 10,800-9,800 Before Present [B.P.]); Cascade style projectile points in components dated 9,600 B.P. and 8,600 B.P.; ten house pits with artifacts dating between 5,050 to 3,100 B.P. regarded as from the Tucannon phase; and, a hearth from the later Harder phase (dated approximately at 1,080 B.P.) (Ames et al., 1981).

Butler noted, "the depositional and cultural sequences at the Weis Rockshelter and the Double-House village site, the Graves Creek-Rocky Canyon locality was continually occupied and inhabited from about 7400 years ago to the beginning of the historic period in the Clearwater Plateau" (Butler 1966:123).

The Cultural Resource program on the Payette National Forest has recovered and recorded, from surface sites located on Forest land, diagnostic artifacts, primarily projectile points, from all of the periods and temporal assemblages represented above.

TRAILS HIDDEN IN THE DUST

When first encountered by Lewis and Clark in 1805 (Thwaites 1959: v.3,p.77), the Nez Perce was a strong, dispersed tribe consisting of bands and villages; each composed of varying numbers, with its own chiefs, separated by geographical divisions. These divisions can be defined as use areas, consisting of hunting, fishing, and root gathering grounds traditionally visited by individual groups, and associated groups, including other bands (Chalfant 1974:62). The cohesion of the tribe varied, as can be noted in the mid-1800's, however, traditional tribe gatherings provided opportunities to re-establish friendly alliances. These gatherings included root/plant harvesting, warparties, councils, celebrations, hunting, and trade fairs. Phinney also made note of annual meetings of Shamans to demonstrate and compare knowledge (Phinney 1934:62-68).

The traditional names of the different bands are no longer known; more recently bands were identified by the geographical divisions (such as the name of a river) or, "by the name of a chief who was prominent in tribal history" (Chalfant 1974:63). They include: the Kamiah bands, the Ahsahka bands, the Lapwai bands, the Snake River bands, the Lower Snake River bands, and the Whitebird bands. The Whitebird bands traditionally utilized lands within the Payette National Forest. Chalfant (1974) noted:

The Whitebird band used to occasionally winter at the present site of Riggins, Idaho, although this was only an alternate location for the same families that lived on Whitebird Creek. The little Salmon River was a summer hunting and fishing area for this group, and they often had their summer camp at Riggins (p.66).

The Whitebird band and other groups living on the lower Salmon River used the Little Salmon and lower Salmon rivers for their main salmon catches. They also made some use of the Selway River, an area used mostly by the Kamiah bands. The latter, however would also fish on the Salmon River. The principal streams used in the Salmon and Snake drainage systems were: Little Salmon River as far south as Big Payette lake, including its tributaries, the Rapid River and Boulder Creek; South Fork of Salmon River and its tributaries, particularly Johnson Creek on the East Fork, and other streams east of McCall, Idaho; Snake River as far south as Boise River... (p.78).

The upper Snake and Salmon river systems were also used by the "Snake" or Shoshoni and Paiute bands. There is full agreement (from informants) that these tribes used Payette Lake, and in late historic times they often met with the Nez Perce there for fishing and horse racing. Earlier in their history, when the Shoshoni were bitter enemies, the Nez Perce traveled in large groups when in the Snake and Salmon country for the area was contested by the southern tribes... (p.79).

...Today the Nez Perce consider the Seven Devils mountains and country south as far as Weiser, Idaho, as their own, but such possessions is admittedly recent (p.114).

Trail routes appear to have been used for generations with little change. Even with the introduction of the horse about 1710-1720 (Haines 1938), old trails were maintained and used. By 1750, the Nez Perce people were mounted (Slickpoo et al. 1973:31). Seasonal subsistence rounds were extended to include trips deep into buffalo country to the east. The Nez Perce adopted many cultural traits of the Plains Indians, but the buffalo as an additional food resource never displaced the older, basic economic hunter/gatherer lifeway.

Chalfant (1974) defines trail routes into the Salmon Rivers and upper Snake River, as follows:

...From Whitebird, thence south along the ridges between the Snake and lower Salmon rivers, across the Seven Devil mountains, thence eastward to New Meadows on the little Salmon River, thence to McCall on the Payette Lake; thence to Hot Spring mountain near Riggins, thence down Salmon river to Whitebird.

...The Lapwai, Kamiah, and Kooskie bands had a trail from their villages on the Clearwater to Whitebird (routes unspecified), thence up the Salmon to Riggins, and up the Little Salmon River to Council, Idaho. This was a rendezvous place for groups traveling by the southern route to Wyoming in spring for buffalo hunting. It was also used locally.

Other parts of the Salmon and Snake river country were used by some groups, but specific trails into this more southerly region are not known today. Johnson Creek and adjacent regions of the South Fork of the Salmon were used for fishing and hunting. Some groups sporadically went as far south as the Payette River, the Weiser and Little Weiser rivers, and also the Boise river. The Seven Devils mountains were hunted by some bands. Black flint, used for war arrow points, was obtained on a small stream emptying into Snake River from the east, north of Weiser, Idaho (Chalfant 1974:90).

General Land Office survey records for 1898 referred to an "Old Indian Trail" beginning near the confluence of Hazard Creek, the Little Salmon River, and Trail Creek. The trail follows the ridgeline south along Indian Mountain to Round Valley Creek, and is thought to be part of the Whitebird Trail.

Idaho pioneer Charles Winkler recounted information about the Council rendezvous site:

I might tell you that to one Perry Clark, a soldier and later a member of the Idaho Territorial Legislature, belongs the honor of naming Council Valley early in the '70's (1870's). Although he was never a resident, he was in the valley many times and knew of all the uses made of it by Indians. And from

that he gave it its name. In other words, meeting place of the great leaders, so to speak. When Mr. Clark first came over the hill, so it has been told, he looked down over the valley of Council and it was pret'near a blanket of horses. Because the Indians met here in the early days for a council. Not a war council, but of peace. They met under five big yellow pine trees that were nearly in the center of the valley. They would race their horses...(and) gamble (Winkler 1976:4).

Several major trails were used to cross the Bitterroot Mountains by the Nez Perce and several other friendly tribes from the west. The oldest is a southern route into western Montana, the Nez Perce Trail. It was used before the horse was introduced. The Lolo Trail was a more direct route and became more important after the tribe became mounted (Chalfant 1974:93-94).

Historic Forest records relate information about trails and camp sites used by the Nez Perce. Forest Ranger Walter Mann in 1918 made the following observations about a location on the South Fork of the Salmon River, near the Cougar Creek trail:

This flat is known as the old Indian Camp. Every Summer the Indians come in from the Nez Perce country, camp and fish for salmon. They usually stay about four weeks, and have used this flat during the salmon run for years. In 1917 about 30 Indians were camped here at one time. The Indians buy up old deer hides whenever they can get them and take them to this camp to tan them. When I was there on October 17, 1917, the camp grounds had been left in good condition. Hair from the old hides was piled against a tree and not scattered. The wigwam sticks were all standing against trees waiting ready to be used next season (Mann 1918).

The Payette National Forest History (1968) contains the following reference:

Well blazed Indian trails can still be found through many portions of the Forest. In 1942 Ranger Glen A. Thompson counted the growth rings on several trees in the Chamberlain district and found most blazes to be about 95 years old. Others believed to be older have been observed (Hockaday 1968:7).

Additional observations about the Chamberlain Basin were recalled by Glenn A. Thompson:

The first white men, of record, in Chamberlain Basin were during the winter of 1821-22 (Ross 1956). A party from Donald McKenzie's Hudson Bay Company built a beaver trapping camp. Jimmy Hand showed me the camp site in 1929. It was located on a sizeable flat south side of Chamberlain Creek above the mouth of Lodgepole Creek. Their journal describes magnificent stands of red boled pine trees over the entire basin (Thompson 1968).

Chalfant (1974) confirms Nez perce use of the area:

The Flathead would come west annually to trade with the Nez Perce; Chamberlain Meadow in Idaho was the favorite location (1974:112).

Individual and groves of peeled ponderosa trees used as a food resource, like those found in the Wallowa Whitman National Forest, have been found on the Payette National Forest (White 1954, Churchill 1989, Reddy 1993).

ACCORDING TO THE SEASONS

The Nez Perce migrated seasonally from larger village winter sites located at low elevations along major rivers, to spring root harvest sites in valleys and mountain meadows. Summer and fall camps were usually found at higher, cooler elevations as the tribe fished, hunted, and harvested food and medicinal plants.

Buffalo hunting parties often wintered in the Plains, sometimes staying more than one year. Until the war in 1877, the Indians (often referred to as the "Non-Treaty" Indians in literature) continued traveling to the Plains to hunt. Lapwai Indian Agent Montieth made the following remarks about the buffalo hunters in 1875:

The (bands)... under the leadership of "Eagle-from-the-Light," "Looking Glass," and "Young Joseph," are comprised of Indians living on the Snake River and Salmon River, together with some from the reserve. At present they are somewhere on the Yellowstone about six hundred miles from here and it is impossible to call them home as requested. The only way is to keep them from going when they are here, and this can be done by giving notice that they will be turned back if they attempt to go, or as soon as they begin making preparations and do not desist when called upon, arrest a few of the leaders and keep them confined until it is too late to attempt the trip.

Generally, a majority of the tribe returned to winter village sites, located along low elevation terraces on the Snake River, Salmon River, Imnaha River, and Clearwater River. Camps sites, consisting primarily of semi-subterranean pit houses, appear to have been re-used by returning groups year after year; re-use depending on the availability of fish, plants, game, firewood and spring water (Schwede 1966:3).

Excavations at the Hells Canyon Creek Village [35WA-78] (Pavesic 1986), located on the west bank of the Snake River, and across from the confluence of Deep Creek (on the Payette National Forest), revealed house pits of a winter village with cache pits in the floors. Only visible surface features (dated to post A.D. 1500) were sampled, however, there were indications (as at Hatwai) the site had been used recurrently. Possible older features were noted during the excavations at Hells Canyon Creek.

Site conclusions noted:

Cache pits were commonly identified throughout as having a large, flat stone covering and small rocky or pebbly bottoms. It was also revealed that processing stones, mortar bases or anvils, were purposely set in the house floors (Pavesic 1986:43).

...a small pocket (cache?), of scrapers was recovered in a pocket of sediment, pit B14, SE quadrant, at 90 cms bd but below the house floor. It is unclear whether this find represents a cache with house fill or an earlier lens of cultural material (Pavesic 1986:32,34).

Bone from the site indicated the bulk of the collection was mountain sheep (Ovis canadensis) and deer (Odocoileus sp.). In the analysis, Miller noted that deer and bighorn herds gathered on winter ranges along the lower elevations of the river, making them easier to hunt (Pavesic 1986:(Miller)Appdx. A:4-5).

One feature of winter river sites was the availability of easily accessed drift wood. In a 1871 letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Lapwai Indian Agent M.B. Montieth argued against the sale of a location where wood was gathered:

July 8, 1871

...At a sharp bend in the Clearwater river, about a half mile down from the mouth of the Lapwai, a large quantity of "drift", brought down from the mountains during the high water of June, is thrown on the Agency side of the Clearwater. As there is no timber of any consequence on this part of the reservation, the Indians have from time immemorial depended largely on this drift for their supply of fuel and they come for many miles around and pack the wood to their homes.

The river canyons not only provided protection against cold winter weather, they provided a reliable supply of migratory birds and spawning fish. The warmer canyon floors was also the source of the earliest green vegetation: food for humans, grazing for animals (horses in particular), and plants used for medicine. Rock outcrops and river gravels supplied lithic materials used in tool manufacture.

Plants available along waterways include willows, alder, syringa, cottonwood, chokecherry, elderberry, serviceberry, Indian hemp, rose, cattails, tule, grasses, and ferns used in the construction of structures and other material goods. Harbinger (1964:52) and Spinden (1908:223) recorded the use of various natural materials in the construction of pithouses, baskets, snow shoes, cradle boards, etc. Both writers noted canoes and rafts used by the Nez Perce were made from driftwood.

Lewis and Clark made the following observations about the tribe:
Their amusements appear but few as their Situation requires the utmost exertion to procure food they are generally employed in that pursuit, all the Summer & fall fishing for the Salmon, the winter hunting the deer on Snow Shoes in the plains and taking care of their immense numbers of horses & in the Spring cross the mountains to the Missouri to get Buffalo robes and meat (meat) & c. at which time they frequently meet with their enemies & lose their horses & many of their people (Thwaites 1959: v.3, 105-6)

As the weather moderated, the camps followed the snowline as it receded up the canyon trails, into to the meadowlands. By summer they were in the higher mountains, catching spawning fish from the smaller side streams, hunting migratory birds and game animals, and harvesting plants and roots. They continually dried, processed and cached food for winter.

Although other writers have indicated bitterroot was only available in trade or in the Bitterroot Mountains, archaeological surveys in the areas northwest of Council, particularly in the North Hornet Creek drainage, have recorded extensive lithic scatters found in association with long ridges where bitterroot is growing. This is well within the area frequented by the Whitebird Band, and near the Whitebird Trail. Bitterroot flowers and can be harvested in late spring in conjunction with kous on the steeper hillsides, and camas in the wet meadows. It is unlikely the Nez Perce, so dependent on plant foods at this time of year, would not have found this large supply of bitterroot and utilized the resource. It would have been logical to harvest these spring/early summer foods on their way to rendezvous at Council, before going on to Yellowstone country, or the Plains. Any surplus could be traded, or cached, to be picked up in the fall before returning to winter quarters.

Harrington makes the following observations about bitterroot:
A bag of the roots was worth as much to the Indians as a horse...The roots were dug in the spring when the plants were in flower. Perhaps the plants were easier to find at that season, but another advantage was that the rind, or outer layer of the roots, slipped off easily then. This covering apparently contains most of the bitter tasting substance, and probably was discarded before cooking (Harrington 1967:182-184).

The technical expertise in locating, harvesting and processing plant foods, fishing, and hunting appears to be high with the Nez Perce people. Successful subsistence is basic in the growth and prosperity of any culture. Skill and training were encouraged from an early age among the Nez Perce.

Special ceremonies were held...for the boy's first game kill and the girls's first root digging and berry picking. It was believed that if a renowned hunter or fisherman ate the boy's

first game, the boy would become a good provider. Girls likewise would become good providers if their first roots and berries were eaten by an expert (Slickpoo et al. 1973:47).

Fall camping began in September. It was the time when the heavy droning of katydids was heard (Phinney 1934:31). The time when hillside springs no longer flow, when aspen and cottonwood turn golden. The air is mellow and rich at mid-day but by early morning heavy frost covers the meadows and ice must be broken.

Late fall was the season for concentrated individual and group hunting for meat and prime fur. "The hunting chief had full charge of the hunt. He called the hunters together, outlined the plan for the day and assigned each member of the party his duties; some to stalk and herd game, others to form the ambuscade (Phinney 1934:360).

Tribal visits were common in the fall:

When marriage occurs in the summer,...the wedding visit is planned in the fall; the husband's family setting the date. The husband's connections, family and friends, prepared dried meats. At the time set they make the trip to the wife's family where a feast awaits this visiting party. The hosts do not partake of the food. During the feast the exchanges of gifts are made. The mother of the bride asks those in her family if they wish to exchange gifts with any particular members of the visitors and if so she arranges it (Phinney 1934:41).

Phinney noted a special friendship term, "insi'kstiwa," translated, "my nest mate," as is a kinship term used between intimate friends (Phinney 1934:51). These alliances within families, especially between individuals, created strong ties.

Intertribal visits and gatherings not only cemented friendship, but they provided (and provide) opportunities to visit, to exchange information and ideas, and for trading. Harbinger noted in the 1960's, "(Intertribal) trading is an Indian activity involving Indian items, thus serving potentially to emphasize the distinction between Indian and white culture" (Harbinger 1964:44).

Trading outside the tribe appears to have been an important activity in the early 1900's. Idaho pioneer, Joe Bennett (1978), relates a trading incident in 1912 at McCall. The Nez Perce were camped at a site known as "Sheep Bridge" (10VY-07) gathering huckleberries, serviceberrys, and fishing for salmon.

They would get salmon on the river...by stretching a net across the river, then below that net they would run their horses up the river, spooking the salmon into that net. Then they would grab clubs, or spears, jump off their horses and get the salmon (pp.4-5).

Bennett's friend had a horse he wanted to sell to the Nez Perce. ...there were a bunch of men setting out under the trees. The women were all working, they were frying fish and were drying it, with it hanging on racks, lots of salmon in the river then. We talked to this one and we talked to that one. They didn't even let on like they even heard us. Finally we got around to a young fellow and he said, "the men don't have anything to do with the horses, you will have to talk to the women. They'll decide if they want to buy horses or not." So we went over to where the women were...They bought the horse and gave him \$15.00 (Bennett 1978:3-4).

Interviews with other pioneers of McCall and Long Valley brought back early memories of seeing the Nez Perce. John Spink, born in 1903, recalled his experience as a young child:

One of the first things that I remember was looking through the fence at a band of Indians, perhaps about thirty or forty riding past our place (at Roseberry) on Indian ponies. The women had papooses on their backs or hanging from the horse gear. They stopped to sell buckskin gloves and moccasins and bead trinkets (Spink 1978:8).

The construction of Black Canyon Dam near Emmett in the 1920's (dam completion, 1924), effectively stopped the migration of spawning fish beyond that point. This loss was a reflection of unconscious, short sighted change; a choice so common in Indian history.

"But the white man made his own condemnation of quite a different kind when he chose to master nature instead of depending on what it would give him. He freed himself from dependence on nature to make himself the slave of his machines" (Slickpoo et al, 1973:iv).

THE SACRED

One of the least understood facets of the Nez Perce culture is the religion of the ancestors. It is a private, sustaining part of The People. The missionaries tried to eliminate it; others have tried to learn it to add meaning to their lives. In a book published by the Nez Perce about their people, Noon Nee-Me-Poo, it is explained:

The religion of our ancestors was based on several fundamental beliefs. Foremost was a belief that there was a supernatural side to our existence and to all of nature. They believed that all things of nature such as rocks, trees, rivers, animals, birds, fish and heavenly bodies could influence them in important ways. Spirits appeared to fortunate men in visions, and a few gifted people, primarily medicine men, knew much about these spirits.

We believe that through visions called wey-ya-kin, guardian spirits gave certain human beings powers that enabled them to do wonderful things. These power were shown in outstanding traits or skills (Slickpoo et al. 1973:57-58).

The vision quest is a personal, intimate ceremony, however, Many Wounds described a personal spiritual experience:

It was far up in the wild mountains of the Little Salmon River, Idaho. A small boy, I was camping with my grandparents. Early in the morning I went up the mountain to look after our horses. I looked ahead a short distance to a small hill against the mountain. There, sitting with his back against a stump of a fallen tree, I saw a man. A fine looking Indian wearing a blanket. Long hair falling about his shoulders. It was splendid hair, yellow or golden. He looked at me but spoke no words.

I saw him setting there, a light like a rainbow circling above his head. I saw the sun rise off to one side of him. I saw its rays shooting down the mountain slope, saw its rays passing over and by the man, but never striking him. Soon the vision faded, nothing remained to be seen of it.

I think the meaning of this vision was this: the suns rays passing without striking the blanketed person in plain view meant arrows and bullets of battle passing without hurt to me. Should I ever be in war I would be willing to try the danger. That vision man had been some great warrior with this kind of "Wyakin" (McWhorter 1983:300).

The Nez Perce spoke of their own place in history:

His (the Indian) own history shows that he fought the white man valiantly, and--in accordance with his own equally valid standards of warfare--cruelly. History shows he lost, as he had to lose, but that he fought like a man, like a true American. He owes nothing for having fought. The owing comes from his acceptance of the degradation imposed on him afterwards, for the fact that the white man made a willing artifact of him for the solace of the white man's troubled soul. He has become something to possess, fought over by the missionaries on one hand and the universities on the other. For this misuse, the white man owes him the chance to make his own choice once more, good or bad (Slickpoo et al. 1973:iv).

AUTHOR'S CONCLUDING NOTES

Some Years ago, the day after my Father died, I walked down the lane towards the barn. In the evening light I could see my Father's footprints in the dust, the last steps he had taken down this road. I stood watching the wind smooth the soil. I could not put the man back in the tracks, I could not save the tracks. I was left with the memories and the respect. The stream was flowing.

And so it is with the Nez Perce, the stream is flowing. They have a new life; new problems, new solutions, but the memories of the ancestors are still there. We can respect their past, their memories, and their future.

END

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