



## Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce

(1840-1904)

Speech of Surrender (1887)

### INTRODUCTION

Joseph was born Hinmuuttu, meaning Thunder Rolling Down the Mountain, the son of Chief Joseph the Elder. His branch of the Nez Perce lived in the Wallowa Valley of northeastern Oregon, one of the most beautiful mountain valleys in the world, with a lake and bountiful fish and game—a paradise. The Nez Perce were friendly to white settlers at first, but as increasing numbers poured west, they began objecting to settlers on their lands, especially to farming and the grazing of livestock.

The Governor of the Washington Territory, Isaac Stevens, organized a council in 1855, at which Chief Joseph the Elder and other Nez Perce chiefs signed a treaty with the United States establishing a Nez Perce reservation, 7.7 million acres in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. This encompassed much of the traditional land of the Nez Perce, including the Wallowa Valley. Then a gold rush attracted whites in even greater numbers. In 1863 the government persuaded the Nez Perce to accept a smaller reservation—780,000 acres in Idaho, excluding the Wallowa Valley, in return for money, schools and a hospital. Paradise Lost.

The head chiefs of the Nez Perce signed the new treaty, but Chief Joseph and some other chiefs refused. Some of the Nez Perce moved onto the reservation, others declined. In 1871, eight years later, Chief Joseph died and his son became a Chief. In 1873 a new treaty gave his people the right to remain in the Wallowa Valley. However, in 1877, after a change of administrations in Washington, the government reversed policy and sent cavalry troops commanded by General Oliver O. Howard, a veteran of the Civil War, to evict the Nez Perce holdouts from the valley. Some Nez Perce wanted war, Chief Joseph and others advocated peace. Unfortunately, at that point a band of young Nez Perce braves killed four white men, starting a war. To avoid more bloodshed, Chief Joseph and other chiefs led their people on a retreat, hoping to make their way north to Canada.

The long retreat of the Nez Perce is one of the saddest stories in American history. Pursued by 2,000 cavalry troops, about 800 Nez Perce crossed the Snake River and fought as they escaped. For over 3 months, using advance and rear guards and skirmish lines and fortifications, they outmaneuvered General Howard and battled their way more than 1,700 miles across Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana. In the press, Chief Joseph became a legend and was called The Red Napoleon. Finally, with no

food and no blankets, after a battle lasting 5 days in freezing weather, he surrendered on 5 October 1877 in the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana, just 40 miles short of Canada.

The long retreat of the Nez Perce became emblematic of the tragedy and pathos involved in the westward movement of the frontier and the displacement of the many native tribes. Chief Joseph is revered for his character: his heroism, integrity and wisdom. His frustrated efforts to attain peace and his principled resistance capsulize the predicament of American Indians, both those who yielded and those who fought the whites. His speech of surrender was written down in a pencil draft by Lieutenant Charles Erskine Scott Wood. The last words of the speech resonate as a poignant epitaph for all the dead of all the tribes.

Chief Joseph has been portrayed in many books, poems, television episodes and other media, notably the film *I Will Fight No More Forever* (1975); "Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce" (1982), a poem by Robert Penn Warren; and a children's book, *Thunder Rolling in the Mountains*. Many structures and geographical features have been named after him as well, including Joseph Canyon, Chief Joseph Pass, Chief Joseph Scenic Byway, Chief Joseph Dam and the town of Joseph in his beloved Wallowa Valley. He is also depicted on the current \$200 series savings bonds. See Alvin M. Joseph, Jr., *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest* (Mariner, 1997).

#### SPEECH OF SURRENDER

Tell General Howard that I know his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead, Tu-hul-hil-sote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who now say yes or no. He who led the young men [Joseph's brother Alikut] 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 and 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. Hear me, my chiefs, my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more against the white man.

or

Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before, I have it in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed; Looking Glass is dead; Tu-hul-hil-sote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes and no. He who led on the young men is dead. It is cold, and we 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. Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.

