

## *Introduction*

*History clearly shows the uprising* that became known as the Nez Perce War of 1877 was neither spontaneous nor long planned but the result of decades of mistrust and treachery. History and recorded facts clearly show Chief Joseph and the other four chiefs involved did not one day simply decide to take their people on the long, arduous journey that led to their ultimate sorrow. Quite the contrary; the war and its aftermath began years before—as early as 1834—the result of four decades of betrayal, deceit that included land-grabbing, a rash of broken promises, the breaking of two formal treaties, and the continued refusals by various Washington departments to honor agreements negotiated with, and accepted by, the Nez Perce tribe.

To fully understand the reasons that lead to the so-called Nez Perce War of 1877 it is necessary to gain some insight into the history of the tribe, the people, the origins of their traditions, the rebellious bands and the series of events that preceded the crisis.

The proper name of the Nez Perce nation is *Nimipu* (pronounced Nee'mee'poo), which means “The People.”<sup>1</sup> Over time the nation grew larger, extended its territory, then fragmented into bands of varying sizes. There is no way of knowing how many bands there were during the long history of the Nimipu, but around 1800 there were estimates of twenty-five bands; by 1877

there were probably fewer than fifteen. By 1855 very few bands were still identified by their original names, which had been derived from areas of residence, traits, customs peculiar to an individual band, and sometimes the name of an original or notable chief. Many had already adopted the English or French names imposed upon them by trappers, explorers and settlers.

The majority of Nez Perce bands did not join the rebellion in 1877, but the large Alpowai [People of the Butterfly Place] supported the cause morally. The names of the bands involved in the Rebellion of 1877 are listed below with their original names and their meaning, when they could be defined, in brackets. Details of band and tribal names, with explanation of how and why the names were Anglicized, are in Appendix K.

Wellamotkin [named for Chief Wellamotkin].<sup>2</sup> It was also known, although rarely, as the Willewah [Wallowa Valley] band, but by 1870 was generally called the Wallowa Band. After 1867 this band included the survivors of the Canyon Band<sup>3</sup> who had merged with the Wellamotkins for protection following a raid by a hostile Snake war party in which their chief was killed.

Asotin, aka Kam'nakka [Clear Creek People]. The group involved in the rebellion was a small segment of the greater Asotin band.

Lamtama [after the river flowing into the Salmon River]. The Lamtama Band was also called the Salmon River Band.

Piquinin [People of the Snake River]<sup>4</sup>

Palu [People of the Rocks]. A small band of the greater Palouse tribe. This band lived under the protection of the Nez Perce.<sup>5</sup>

Inter-marriage between bands and even between tribes was neither uncommon nor discouraged because marriage helped form alliances of peace and cooperation. As a result the Nimipu were closely allied or related to the Umatilla [River People]; Kalispel [Camas People] aka Pend d'Oreille [Wearers of Earrings]; Wallawalla [People of Many Rivers]; Schitsu'umsh [We Who are Found Here]; Skitswish [The People] aka Coeur d'Alene<sup>6</sup>; Sihgomen [Sun People] aka Spokane; Tet'aw'ken [We Persons] aka Cayuse; Wana-pum [Of the River]; Klickitat [People from Beyond the Moun-

tains]<sup>7</sup>; Qwulh'waipum [Prairie People]; Waptailnsim [People of the Narrow River] aka Yakima.

Some of the bands spoke dialects rooted in the Penutian language group while others spoke a Sahaptian dialect. These were considered Plateau Indians. Others were thought of as Plains Indians because their languages were similar to Selish, also called Salish<sup>8</sup> and Chinook (and also referred to as Flatheads by early explorers and settlers).<sup>9</sup> It is very difficult to pinpoint the roots of all Indian languages decisively because lines cross many times over. For example, the group of languages known as Athabaskan extends from the sub-Arctic into Mexico. This circumstance makes it possible, once differences of dialect are overcome, for the Apaches<sup>10</sup> [Ndee, "The People"] in Arizona and New Mexico to converse with the Beavers [Dunne'za, "Real People"] and the Carriers [Dakelh, "Water Travelers"] of northern Alberta and BC.<sup>11</sup>

Tribal names are also difficult to define, as over the decades many changed, some several times, and many modern names have neither resemblance nor connection to the originals. One example is Nez Perce. In 1807 the Nimipu received their modern name through a misunderstanding of customs by associates of the Canadian explorer David Thompson [1770–1857].<sup>12</sup>

In 1805 Thompson and companions were camped on the shores of Lake Windermere<sup>13</sup> in eastern BC. Thompson was idly wondering where to go next when a minor rivulet gurgling its way to freedom from the lake caught his eye. His curiosity piqued, he decided to follow it a distance to see where it might lead. Preliminary observance determined it was on a southern course and that it was rapidly widening. Thompson realized he had discovered the source of a river that he assumed was probably minor, but he decided to follow it further to determine if this new find might have some importance. He and his companions set out, and as the days passed Thompson's "minor river" continued to increase in width and force. Many weeks later they become the first white men to cross Latitude 49°N from just west of the Rockies. In so doing they opened Idaho's first northern portal. In 1807 Thompson came to the end of his latest survey. While he had first presumed this would

be a “minor” river, he had in fact discovered, surveyed and charted the entire length of the mighty Columbia River.

Thompson and his associates encountered many bands during the two years (1805–1807) they spent charting the Columbia River. Near the Lower Columbia River Basin they spent some time with a band they thought was Nimipu. The males pierced their noses in order to insert horizontal skewers made of dentalium,<sup>14</sup> so Thompson’s French speaking associates assumed that all Nimipu bands followed this practice. They were mistaken, both about the name of the band (it has never been discovered to which tribe the band belonged) and about the nose piercing, as Nimipu males are not known to have pierced their noses for any reason at any time. However, as a result of the explorers’ nescience the Nimipu were erroneously named Nez Percé (pronounced Nay-Pair-Say: literally “pierced noses”). Over time the spelling was Anglicized to Nez Perce (pronounced Nes Purse). Within a few more decades the Nimipu themselves adopted the Anglicized pronunciation and today generally refer to themselves as Nez Perce. Why the Nimipu adopted the erroneous name is unknown.

Thompson’s opening of Idaho’s northernmost trail led to a further influx of Canadian trappers to add to those who were arriving via Montana and southern Alberta. As had earlier trappers who had come via eastern trails, the newcomers also become friends with the Nez Perce, trading with them freely and honestly. Because of mutual trust there was very little trouble.<sup>15</sup>



For hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years the Nimipu and their equally powerful neighbors, the Selish, shared a large portion of the upper Northwest plus a small northern area of what is now Utah, the Western Shoshones [Tukuaduka, “Sheep Eaters”] and the Utes [Nuu’t’siu, “The People”] holding the greater area. So vast and diverse was the area it stretched west from Montana’s Bitterroot

Mountains to the Coastal Mountains. While the Nimipu ranged mainly in Idaho and the eastern parts of Oregon and Washington, the Selish also extended their range into southern British Columbia. Thus, the two tribes controlled much of the flat plains, lush grasslands, high plateaus, sere deserts, heavily timbered valleys and rivers that coursed from the Rocky Mountains to the Cascades.<sup>16</sup> Many rivers, some gently flowing, others raging maelstroms, flowed through the numerous valleys.

Although Nimipu bands ranged far and wide, the majority stayed within the plateaus and valleys of northeastern Oregon and Idaho encompassed by the Bitterroot, Clearwater and Blue Mountains. A vast grassland in Idaho, now called Camas Prairie, owes its name to a prolific plant the Nez Perce called “kamas.”<sup>17</sup> It was a principal harvesting area because of the kamas plant’s nutritious root and medicinal blossoms.

Six rivers flow through the land that once belonged to the Nimipu, all traveling diverse directions and distances before becoming one. Three—Grande Ronde, Powder and Salmon, each flowing different routes—merge into and become part of the powerful Snake River<sup>18</sup> as it rushes northward. Just south of the present city of Lewiston the Clearwater River, flowing from the east, joins the Snake. Continuing westward the Snake meets and becomes part of the great Columbia River that has travelled southward from its headwaters at Windermere Lake, BC, through the Columbia Valley to its rendezvous with the Snake. From the point of confluence<sup>19</sup> those six great rivers, now called The Columbia, rush a distance south before turning westward on the final leg to the Pacific.

There were occasional territorial clashes with the warlike Snakes, the Shoshone and the equally hostile Bannocks [Panaiti or Bana’kwut, “Northern People”].<sup>20</sup> The Nimipu, despite a nonaggressive nature, emerged the victors more often than not. There were also long periods of peaceful coexistence during which wiser chiefs made treaties that allowed their people to enjoy peace and good fortune. Overall, the passing centuries saw the Nimipu flourish and increase in population.

According to Nez Perce accounts and recorded American his-

tory, the first contact between Nez Perces and white men occurred in late 1804 when the Lewis and Clark expedition stumbled out of blizzard into one of their villages. The Nez Perce account, if true, shows the initial meeting did not start in particularly amiable fashion.

Winter's fierce grip was already upon the land when a group of dirty, shaggy-haired creatures stumbled out of a snowstorm into a Nez Perce village. So matted and dirty were their coats it looked as if they were large fur-bearing animals. They were so incredibly filthy and smelled so terrible the fastidiously clean villagers<sup>21</sup> looked upon the group as aberrant mutants descended from bears that had mated with wolves. Their first thought was to destroy these strange animals.

Village elders were debating the matter when a woman saw the group huddled around a fire trying to get warm. She declared they were humans. Then, realizing her people had never seen a white man, she reminded the elders of how, when and why she had been adopted into their band. Many years before, her story goes, at a very young age she had been seized by a Sioux war party who sold her to a Delaware band [Lenni Lenape "True People"] who took her east. After two summers she was rescued by soldiers who took her to a white family on a nearby farm. That family arranged for her return to Montana and from there she found her way to her homeland in Idaho. Though she remembered she was Nimipu, she could not remember her original name, her family or the band to which she had belonged. Luckily she found refuge with this band and was adopted into a family. Because she was unable to remember her original name her new family named her Watkuweis [Returned-from-far-away].

Watkuweis persuaded the elders to spare these men because she was convinced Whites were good people. The strangers were given food and shelter, and over the next days regained their health on a diet of kamas, smoked fish and buffalo.<sup>22</sup> The group stayed throughout the winter and resumed their journey the following spring. In fact, had it not been for Watkuweis' appeal and the Nez Perces' ongoing assistance, the "bear-wolves" would have become just another group of explorers to perish in the vast ranges of west-

ern mountains, and the Lewis and Clark Expedition would never have gained its fame.<sup>23</sup>

Whether Watkuweis saved them or not, it has long been undisputed that had it not been for Nez Perce help during the harsh winter of 1804–05 the Lewis and Clark expedition would have perished. As Lewis and Clark made their way through the territory towards the Pacific they estimated the tribe tallied well above 6,000 men, women and children. By 1850 less than half that number could be counted. Disease and other evils introduced by white men (including a number of atrocious murders of Natives, of which all but one went unpunished)<sup>24</sup> had exacted an appalling toll.

Four areas of the tribe's vast holding became crucial bones of contention in events leading to the 1877 uprising. The major areas were Oregon's Wallowa Valley,<sup>25</sup> two large areas in Idaho and a smaller one in north-eastern Washington. Laying claim to these particular areas respectively were the Wellamotkin, Lamtama and Piquin, plus the small above-mentioned band the Nez Perces knew as the Palus. All four were in more-or-less permanent encampments except the Wellamotkins who, because they divided each year between summer and winter camps, were considered semi-transient. From spring until late summer or mid-autumn they lived in the Wallowa Valley, devoting their time and labor to harvesting the abundant plants and roots growing there. This harvest provided their winter sustenance. The band wintered in the adjoining Imnaha Valley.

All four bands sent warriors eastward to Montana each spring to hunt the wide-ranging *qoq'a'lx* [buffalo], an encroachment not tolerated gladly by Montana's permanent inhabitants. These were the Sioux known as Dakota and Lakota [Allies]<sup>26</sup> and the Cheyenne [Tsitsistas, "Red Speakers"], who claimed most of Montana and the Dakotas as their lands. Other claimants were the Sisika [Blackfeet] and their confederacy of tribes in northern Montana, southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. Known as the Blackfeet Confederacy<sup>27</sup> it was a large, but loose, coalition. While all resented encroachment, so greatly respected were the Nez Perce warriors' fighting ability they rarely made a challenge. Thus, the Nez Perces hunted when and where they pleased; but when the hunt ended they returned to their

own lands, never claiming any of the vast prairies. They considered Montana a great place to hunt, but not a desirable place to live.

Nez Perce hunters also frequented the traditional lands of the Absarokee<sup>28</sup> [Bird People] known to Whites as the Crows. The Crows also claimed a large area of Montana but made no effort to drive off the Nez Perce hunters, who repaid the Crows' hospitality by assisting them in fending off attacks by the Cheyenne and Sioux. In 1873, when a combined force of Crows and Nez Percés delivered a decisive defeat to Cheyenne and Sioux raiders,<sup>29</sup> the Crow chiefs, to acknowledge their gratitude, vowed they would never deny assistance to the Nez Perce, should help be needed. As future events proved, the Crow chiefs had either spoken in the heady glow of victory or with forked tongues. In 1877 they reneged on their promise, effectively denying the Nez Perce any chance of settling on their lands. Another consequence of their treachery was a delay that contributed to the Nez Perce being unable to reach safe haven in Canada.

Sometime during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Indians of the plains and northwest saw their fortunes increase with the arrival of large animals never before seen in their lands. These animals were, of course, horses; they captured many, using them at first to pull heavy loads, such as bundles of buffalo hides, lodge poles and other items, on a type of frame sled.<sup>30</sup> And when it was discovered horses could be ridden, warriors and hunters became very mobile indeed. The Nez Percés called the strange creatures *ma'min* [big dog].<sup>31</sup> They became expert equestrians, a skill that changed their strategy in hunting and later in warfare.

When the Palu began to crossbreed various *ma'mins* they either inadvertently, or by design, developed an entirely new breed of beautiful, broad-chested, powerful animal with uniquely spotted hindquarters. They called this breed Appaloosa.<sup>32</sup> The Palus shared their new animals with the Nez Percés, who soon became owners of large herds. Just as an individual's wealth was determined by the number of horses he possessed, so a band's wealth was likewise defined by the size of its communal herd.

When trappers, explorers and settlers arrived they recognized



the quality of the Appaloosa and offered to trade goods and commodities for horses. The Nimipu quickly realized how valuable were their animals, and white men equally as quickly learned Nez Perce men were no slouches in the fine art of horse trading. The currency of trade and commerce became guns, iron utensils, practical tools, rope, twine, cloth and other clothing material of good quality. The latter items held special appeal to the women who also became expert in the dealing and trading of horses.

Unfortunately, the trappers and explorers also introduced as items of commerce and trade Hudson's Bay rum and rye whiskey, plus myriad other vices. They also seriously interfered with an established societal structure when they and Nez Perce women united in what came to be known as "country marriage." In many cases the unions proved lasting<sup>33</sup> but there were also many that did not. Through death and desertion many women, almost always with children to look after, were left to fend for themselves. Fortunately for them, the Nimipu social and family structure was geared to the care and protection of women and children. There is no evidence of prejudicial attitudes or enmity having been levied by their peers against women or their children, who by circumstance had suffered marital misfortune.<sup>34</sup> The nuptial arrangements also gave North American vocabulary a new word: "squawman."<sup>35</sup>

Idaho, Oregon and Washington territories were all part of British North America by the time Nez Percés began trading with white men. Because they mainly dealt with Canadian trappers, they referred to themselves as "British Indians."<sup>36</sup> This was a commercial alliance, not allegiance to Britain. Neither was it a military accord, for Nez Perce warriors did not normally ally themselves militarily with anyone.<sup>37</sup> Regardless, they never hesitated to assist anyone encountering difficulties with Sioux, Cheyenne or Blackfeet war or hunting parties.

Cracks in the alliance first appeared with the amalgamation of The Hudson Bay Company and The Northwest Company. It widened further upon the arrival of John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company. Eventually Nez Percés switched their alliance to the