

Auto Tour



The flight of the **NEZ PERCE**

...through the Big Hole,
Horse Prairie and
Lemhi Valleys - 1877



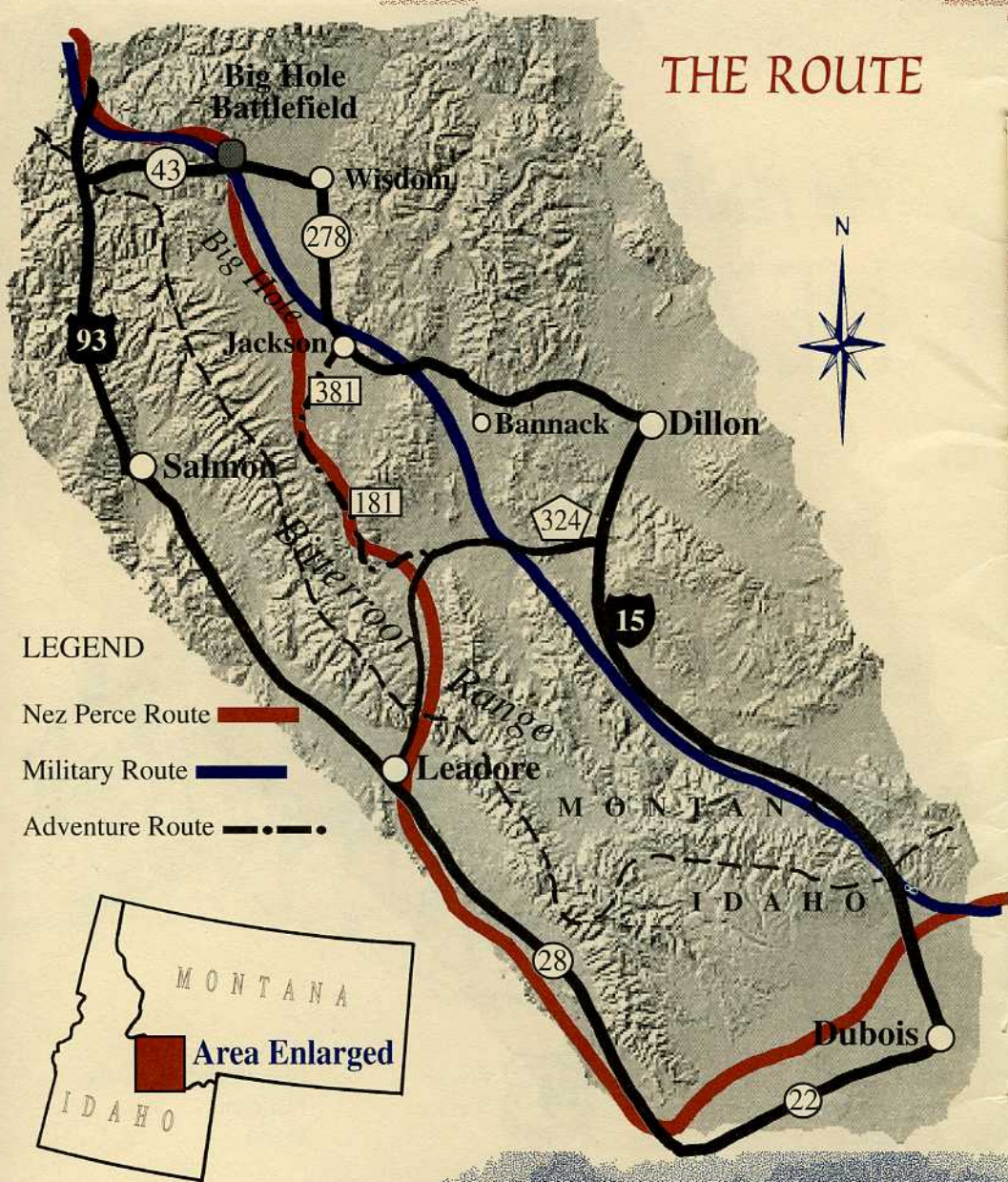
United States
Department of
Agriculture



Forest
Service

Beaverhead-Deerlodge
National
Forest

THE ROUTE



In August 1877, the tranquility of the Big Hole Valley was shattered by the sound of gunfire as a battle erupted between five bands of Nez Perce Indians and U.S. military forces along the banks of the Big Hole River. For valley settlers, anxiety turned to fear and concern as nearly 800 Nez Perce men, woman and children gathered their wounded and fled southward towards Skinner Meadows and the country beyond.

Today, you can retrace the route used by the Nez Perce and their military pursuers. This brochure describes the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail between Big Hole National Battlefield, Montana and Leadore, Idaho. The map shows the auto tour route in detail.

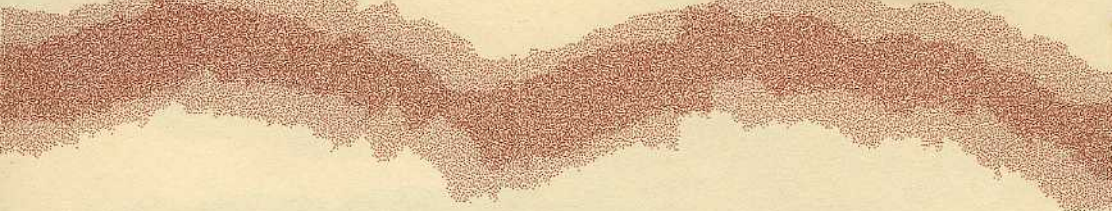


Auto Tour Route -

This designated auto route stays on all-weather roads and allows you to experience the Nez Perce Trail from a distance. The auto tour route is passable for all types of vehicles. An alternative route exists from Lost Trail Pass on the Montana/Idaho border south to Salmon and Leadore, Idaho along Hwy. 93 and 28.

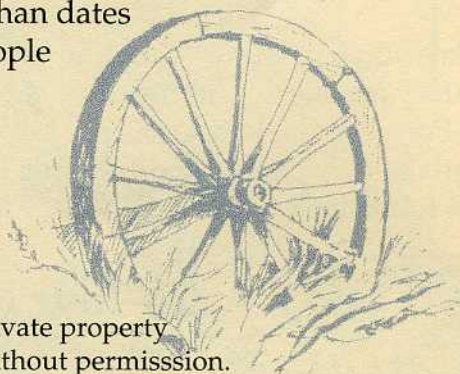
Adventure Route -

For those seeking the most authentic historic route, a rough two lane road, connects Jackson, Montana and the Horse Prairie Valley. Examine the map carefully and watch for signs. You may want to take a more detailed Forest Map. The adventure route is usually passable from July to October. It is not recommended for motor homes or vehicles towing trailers.

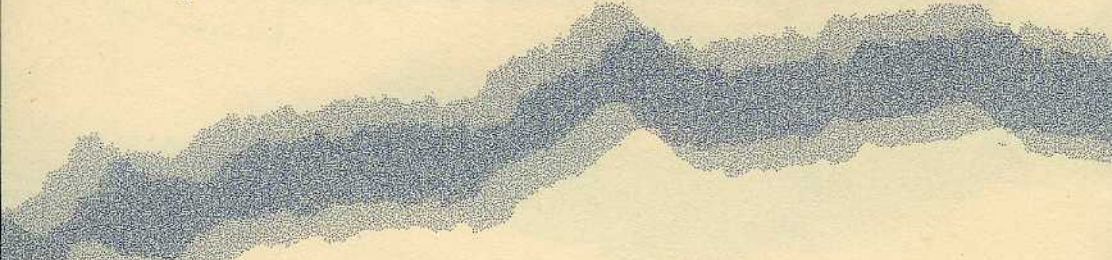



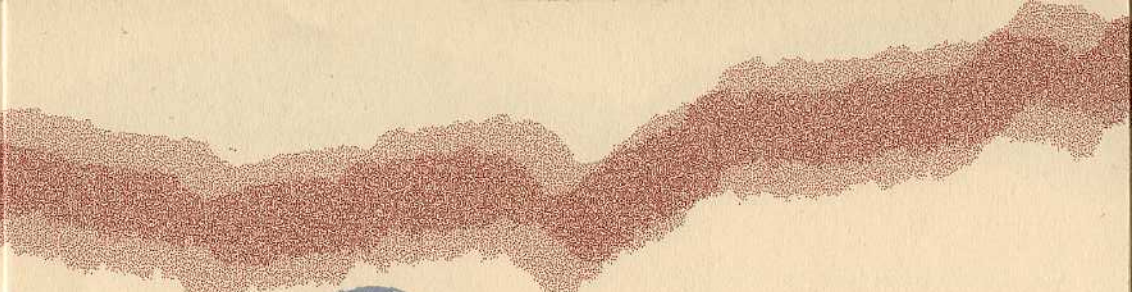
Follow the Nee-Me-Poo Trail as it traces the route traveled by five bands of Nez Perce people in 1877. You make the choice: Stay on the designated auto tour route along paved and gravel roads, or explore the adventure route that more closely follows the historic trail. You'll encounter a story of courage and great sadness.

You will see where history happened and realize that this story is more than dates and events. It is about real people caught up in a turmoil beyond their control.




Driving Tips:

- * Many historic sites are on private property and should not be explored without permission.
 - * Watch out for weather changes! Most of the dirt roads are fine for passenger cars when dry, but become impassable when it rains or snows. Four wheel drive may be needed on some roads. Snow is possible at any time of the year.
 - * Plan on a full day. This is big country and some roads are slow. Be sure your fuel tank is full and realize if you stop to explore it will take more time than you think.
 - * Treat all historic sites with respect. Memories of war and death still fill many places you will visit. Take away nothing but pictures.
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Background to the Conflict of 1877 -

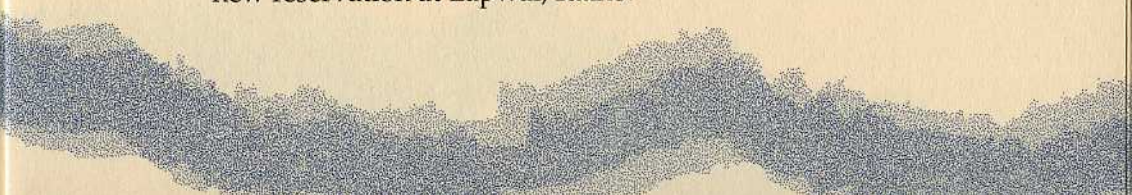
*"The War Nobody Wanted
and Everybody Lost"*



"My son, my body is returning to my mother earth and my spirit is going very soon to see the Great Spirit Chief. When I am gone think of your country...A few more years and the white men will be all around you. They have their eyes on this land. My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and mother." (Old Chief Joseph to his son, Young Joseph, 1871).

In the mid 1800's settlers began encroaching upon Nez Perce Indian lands protected under the treaty of 1855. As a result, tension and anger between the Nez Perce and the newcomers grew. In 1863, the United State Government forced a new treaty that reduced Nez Perce lands to a reservation one tenth the size of the 1855 boundary and ordered all Nez Perce to live there.

Five separate bands, led by Chiefs Joseph, White Bird, Looking Glass, Too-hool-hool-zote and Hahtalekin, refused to sign the 1863 treaty. After more than a decade of government pressure the five bands, now known as the non-treaty Nez Perce, reluctantly agreed to move to the new reservation at Lapwai, Idaho.



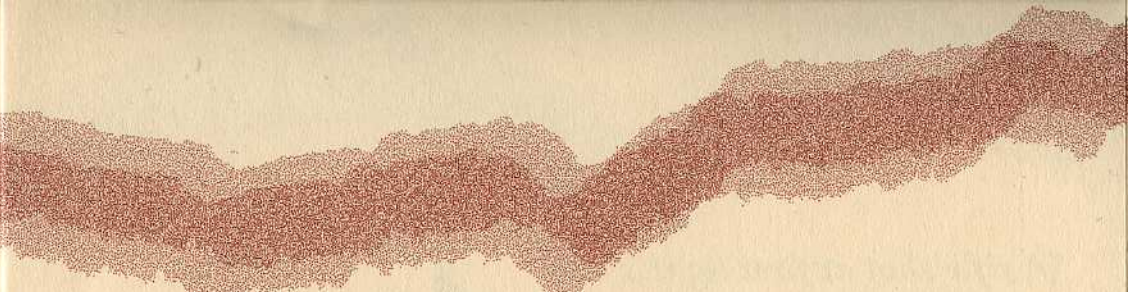
During their journey to Lapwai, fighting broke out when several young warriors, avenging past wrongs, attacked and killed white settlers along the Salmon River. When word of the attacks reached Lapwai the military responded. On June 17, 1877, the first major battle of the Nez Perce campaign occurred at White Bird Canyon, Idaho.

Other skirmishes followed as Army units and citizen volunteers commanded by General Howard tried to rein in the Nez Perce. The five bands fled to Montana hoping to leave the conflict behind them. Circumventing a barcade near Lolo, Montana, they travelled peacefully up the Bitterroot Valley toward a favorite camping spot in the Big Hole Valley. There, in a meadow near the North Fork of the Big Hole River, they rested, gathering edible camas bulbs and cut tipi poles in preparation for their journey to the plains further east.




*"That night the warriors paraded about camp, singing, all making a good time. It was first since the war started. Everybody with good feelings. Going to the buffalo country! No more fighting after Lolo Pass. War was quit! All Montana citizens our friends. This land had belonged to the Flatheads, our old time friends. They called it Iskumkselalik Pah; meaning "Place of the ground squirrels."
(Yellow Wolf)*






The Nez Perce, however, were unaware that another pursuer had taken up the chase. Ordered to Missoula from Fort Shaw, Colonel John Gibbon and his 7th Infantry made a forced march through the Bitterroot Valley, covering upwards of thirty miles a day. After reaching the Big Hole Valley, scouts quickly located the Nez Perce camp.

Looking down on more than ninety tipis spread out along the North Fork of the Big Hole River, Gibbon ordered his men to prepare for a surprise attack. At 4:00 a.m. on August 9, 1877, as the first light of dawn broke the eastern horizon, Gibbon's troops awaited the signal to start their assault.



"Our skirmishers were advanced a short distance where we remained for the signs of the coming daylight, when a solitary Indian came out from the lodges, riding directly towards us, evidently going to their herd of horses, ...we had come between them and their stock. In order for the Indian to reach the horses, he would have to come through our line, and we could not remain long without being discovered. My men had been instructed (to shoot the first Indian they saw) and the poor devil paid the penalty. Some four or five of the boys helped him on his way." (John Catlin)

The soldiers descended upon the sleeping village, plunging into willows and icy water as they set the stage for the battle of the Big Hole.



"About early morning I was awakened. My father and Chief Yellow Bull were standing, talking low. They thought they saw soldiers across the creek. Next instant we heard shots from above the creek across the canyon, maybe a quarter mile away. I heard the loud call, "We are attacked! We are attacked!" (Red Elk)

"A rifle shot at first light..."

BIG HOLE BATTLEFIELD TO SKINNER MEADOWS



"Few of us will soon forget the wail of mingled grief, rage and horror which came from the camp four or five hundred yards from us when the Indians returned to it and recognized their slaughtered warriors, woman and children. Above this wail of horror we could hear the passionate appeal of the leaders urging their followers to fight and the warwhoops in answer which boded us no good." (from Gibbon's report)

For two days the fighting wore on. Despite Gibbon's surprise attack, the Nez Perce rallied and turned the tide of battle. On a wooded knoll above the river, Gibbon and his men found themselves pinned down in rifle pits, hastily dug with tools at hand including trowel bayonets. As the fighting continued the Nez Perce quickly broke camp and prepared to leave. They buried their dead as best they could, loaded the wounded on travois and set off south through the Big Hole Valley.



"All along the trail was crying. Mourning for many left where we thought no war would come. Old people, half grown boys and girls, mothers and little babies. Many only half buried and left for the wolves and coyotes. I can never forget that day." (Black Eagle)

Finally, with one last volley of shots at the entrenched soldiers, the warriors set off to reunite with their families.

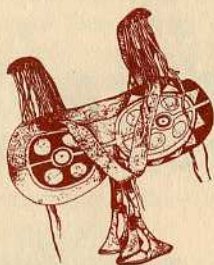




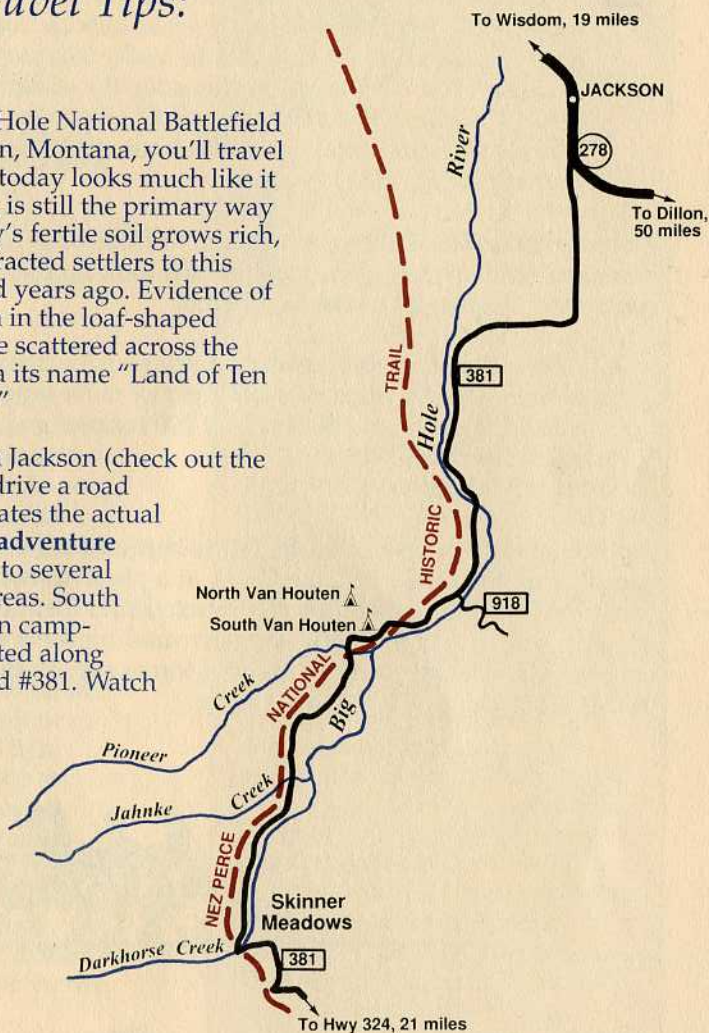
Travel Tips:


As you leave the Big Hole National Battlefield and journey to Jackson, Montana, you'll travel through country that today looks much like it did in 1877. Ranching is still the primary way of life here. The valley's fertile soil grows rich, thick grass, which attracted settlers to this region over a hundred years ago. Evidence of its bounty can be seen in the loaf-shaped mounds of hay that lie scattered across the valley, giving this area its name "Land of Ten Thousand Haystacks."

After passing through Jackson (check out the hot springs) you can drive a road that closely approximates the actual Nez Perce route. **The adventure route** provides access to several camping and picnic areas. South and North Van Houten campgrounds are both located along Skinner Meadow Road #381. Watch for the signs!




Nez Perce woman's saddle





"From the Big Hole, Chief Hototo (Lean Elk) was the guide and leader of the Nez Percés. He had been all over the country, east and north, and he knew the land and the trails...The people covered many miles each sun. They were outdistancing the soldiers, gaining on them all the time. Everybody was glad." (Wottolen, tribal historian, telling how Lean Elk (Poker Joe) took over the group following the Battle of the Big Hole)

Wounded in battle, Gibbon was taken to Deerlodge, Montana for treatment. Meanwhile, General Howard took up the chase and continued his pursuit of the Nez Perce.



*"There was no stuttering about picking up trails along there, for the main big trail of the hostiles led right off to the south. Horse tracks and mule tracks, and the tracks of 200 troopers and doughboys following them."
(J.W. Redington)*

Approximately twelve miles from the battlefield the Nez Perce made camp along the banks of Lake Creek at a place known as Takseen or "willows". It is believed they constructed rifle fortifications by digging shallow depressions and surrounding them with stone cobbles. General Howard's pursuing forces reportedly bivouacked at this same location a few days later.

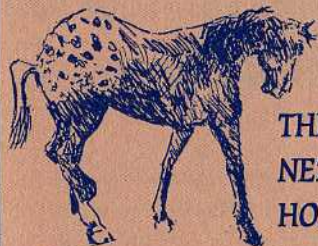




Looking west you'll see the southern end of the Bitterroot Mountains. Along this boundary between Montana and Idaho is the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail providing excellent day and overnight hikes.

The headwaters of the Big Hole River, one of Montana's blue-ribbon trout streams, are found here at the base of the Big Hole Divide. As you look at the lush grass and gentle waters of Skinner Meadows its easy to imagine the Nez Perce or military stopping here to rest.

For those who choose to stay on the designated **auto route**, continue on Hwy 278 from Jackson to Dillon, Montana. Along the way stop at Bannack State Park. The ghost town of Bannack was Montana's first territorial capital. This is where frightened citizens barricaded themselves in the Hotel Meade following word the Nez Perce were approaching. Allow an hour or two for your visit.



THE NEZ PERCE HORSES

The Nez Perce were introduced to the horse in the 1730s. Their mastery of the animal soon went beyond the ability to pack and ride. The Nez Perce learned that through selective breeding they could cultivate a horse uniquely suited to the country in which they lived. Sure-footed, hard-hoofed, strong winded and powerful, Nez Perce ponies became prized among both whites and Indians alike. Meriweather Lewis called them, "lofty elegantly formed active and durable." While the Nez Perce used and bred all types of horses, some were developed with distinct markings; large spots colored various shades of brown, that set them apart from other horses. Early fur traders knew them as Nez Perce horses. Homesteaders to the area called them appalousey after the Palouse River region of eastern Washington. Soon, a Palouse horse became known as an appaloosa, a name they carry to this day.

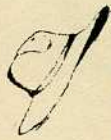
"Leaving the Big Hole Valley behind...."

SKINNER MEADOWS TO HORSE PRAIRIE



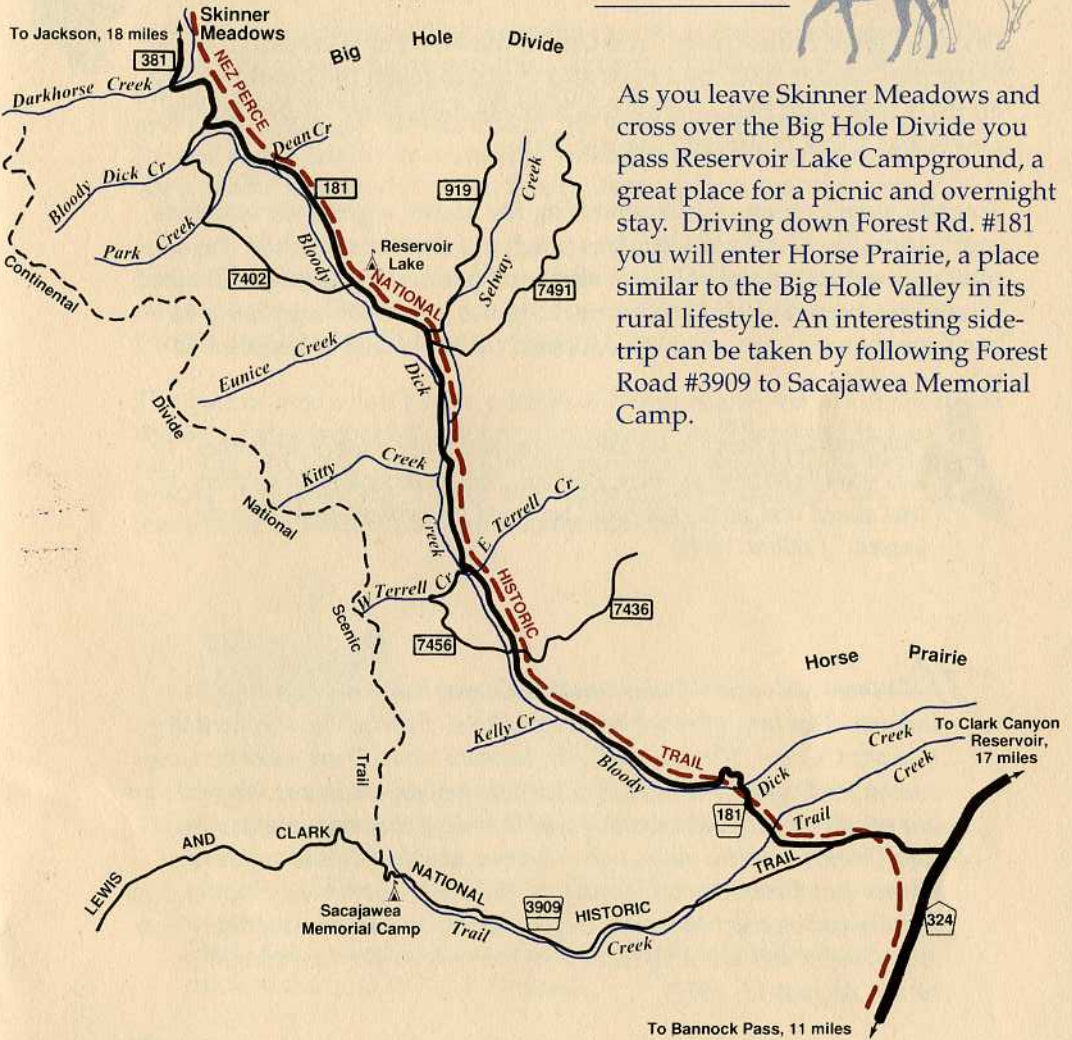
Leaving the Takseen camp the Nez Perce moved south through the Big Hole River drainage. A few miles beyond where Skinner Meadows Rd. #381 enters the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest lies the broad expanse of Skinner Meadows, bordered on the east and west by thick-timbered slopes. With General Howard three days behind them, this area presented the Nez Perce an excellent place to stop and rest.

General Howard's movements through the Big Hole are unclear. His written records indicate he and his men left the battlefield on August 13th and kept "far to the left of the Indian's trail." Somewhere near the town of Bannack they bivouacked at a camp they named in honor of Lieutenant Bradley, killed at the Big Hole battle three days earlier.



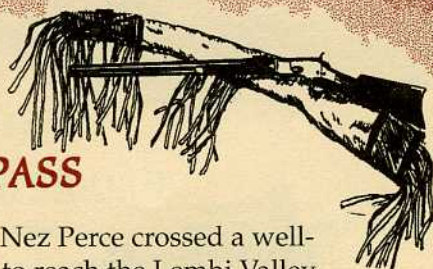
"The balance of Howard's cavalry (some 180)..left on the morning of the 13th..following the trail of the Nez Perces up the Big Hole river to Poplar Creek, thence across a low divide to Horse Prairie Creek." (Henry Buck describing the movement of General Howard and his troops through the Big Hole Valley)

Moving southeast, the Nez Perce crossed Big Hole Divide and followed Bloody Dick Creek downstream toward Horse Prairie.



As you leave Skinner Meadows and cross over the Big Hole Divide you pass Reservoir Lake Campground, a great place for a picnic and overnight stay. Driving down Forest Rd. #181 you will enter Horse Prairie, a place similar to the Big Hole Valley in its rural lifestyle. An interesting side-trip can be taken by following Forest Road #3909 to Sacajawea Memorial Camp.

*"In the wrong place
at the wrong time..."*



HORSE PRAIRIE TO BANNOCK PASS

Once in Horse Prairie, near Trail Creek, the Nez Perce crossed a well-worn trail used in 1805 by Lewis and Clark to reach the Lemhi Valley on their westward trek. Today, this route is designated as part of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail.


Tragedy struck again. While searching for horses a group of warriors came upon the Montague-Winters ranch. As they approached the ranch house, shooting broke out and four settlers, including William Montague, were killed. After ransacking the house for supplies and bandage material, the warriors rounded up all available horses and left.



"We now kept moving for three suns, watching always for horses. It was good to have fresh ones. Best too, that none be left for soldiers. It was aimed that no horses could be found by soldiers anywhere we passed." (Yellow Wolf)



"Where is Cooper?" I told him that Cooper had gone back to the Indians. Not long after we heard two shots. 'Sporty,' the shepherd dog was with 'Coop.' When we left, Mr. Howard said, 'There's one for Coop and on for Sporty.' Poor Coop! That was just at sundown...We made up our minds to go out as soon as possible at daybreak and see if we could find Cooper...We had only gone about one fourth of a mile up the road toward Junction when we found him. We had to go up the gulch and get a sluice box in order to make a coffin." (Andrew Meyers describing how Alex Cooper was killed by Nez Perce warriors on the Tom Hamilton ranch, August 13, 1877).




Meanwhile, citizens of the territorial capital at Bannack braced for the worst. The Hotel Meade became a fortress where woman, children, and the elderly sought safety. With feather beds piled against the windows and food and water stored inside, the townsfolk prepared for a prolonged siege. Lookouts on nearby hilltops watched for approaching danger and prepared to warn those below by beating on drums.

Fear of a Nez Perce attack spread to other parts of the region as well. East of Bannack, settlers in Marysville and Argenta sought refuge in a mining tunnel. Others barricaded themselves at ranches where log corrals and stout buildings were available.

The fear of attack felt by the people of Bannack proved unnecessary as the Nez Perce bypassed the town by more than fifteen miles. Led by Lean Elk, the band traveled almost due south across Horse Prairie toward Bannock Pass. Today, this route closely parallels Hwy #324 as it leaves Horse Prairie and approaches Bannock Pass.



As you reach the summit of Bannock Pass take time to read the informational signs posted there. They offer a glimpse of the unique history of this area. Step outside your car and notice the old rail bed where the Gilmore and Pittsburg Railroad wound its way up the mountain. Built in 1867, the road leading over the pass and into Idaho was known as the Bannock Wagon Road and served as a route to the gold fields at Bannack.



"The Trail Divides"

The Military Route - HORSE PRAIRIE AND BEYOND



The movements of General Howard and his troops through the Horse Prairie region differ from those of the Nez Perce. Howard received word of the warriors' attacks at Horse Prairie while encamped north of Skinner Meadows. He left the main trail and quickly pushed his troops towards Bannack on August 14th. At Bannack they were met by grateful citizens who cheered them on "by their happy faces and welcome word...." Such a pleasant reception was a welcome change for the general, who complained that people in the Bitterroot Valley "stoutly blamed us for chasing the Indians to their neighborhood."

Continuing south, General Howard reached Horse Prairie on August 15 and camped on a nearby ranch, a "grand farm, well fenced and well kept". His hosts, the Barretts, were less enthusiastic about the military bivouacking at their home.



"My husband...buried account books, etc. and came home, and cached household goods in the willows and when Gen. Howard came through with his soldiers, he put a guard with the goods...one brave fellow took a Confederate bill out of my cabinet, also a switch of hair! Was his wife in need of it or did he think it would serve as a scalp-lock?" (Alice Barrett)

Convinced the Nez Perce would head for the plains of central Montana, Howard scrapped his plan to assist the fortified community of Junction, Idaho and stayed east of Bannock Pass.



*"...I moved forward, keeping far to the left of the Indians' trail, and did not forget that the said buffalo country was still eastward."
(Howard explaining his plan not to pursue the Nez Perce into the Lemhi Valley)*

Howard followed the Corrine-Virginia City Road to Junction Station in southern Idaho, hoping to intercept the Nez Perce before they crossed the stage road and headed for Yellowstone Park. Howard's route took them south toward Dubois, Idaho along a route closely paralleled today by Interstate 15.



"We made a drive for the Corrine and Deer Lodge stage-road, hoping almost against hope to catch the Indians as they emerged from the mountains, and attempted to cross this road."(Howard)

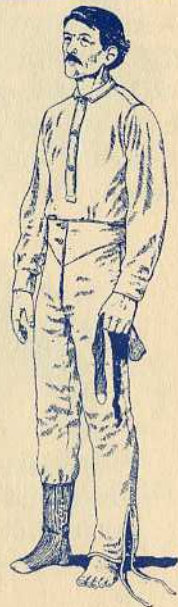
The Soldier

U.S. soldiers in the war of 1877 came from a variety of backgrounds. Many were recent emigrants barely able to speak English, others were educated Americans, and a few joined simply for adventure.

Known as "walking soldiers," the infantry proved to be the backbone of the frontier Army, more so than the glorified cavalry.

A soldier's life meant low pay, ill-fitting clothing, and bad food. Outfitted with outdated Civil War surplus and arms they sometimes found themselves out-gunned by better equipped adversaries.

As tension and hostilities between Euro-American settlers and Indians increased, the poor foot soldier often ended up in harms way as he did his best to enforce what were sometimes unpopular government demands and policies.



"Back into Idaho..."



BANNOCK PASS TO LEADORE

Which route the Nez Perce followed as they left Montana and entered Idaho is unclear. Possibilities include Deadman Pass or a trail leading to the Lemhi Valley through Jakes Canyon. The most probable, however, is the route over Bannock Pass.

On August 13, 1877, an advance party of Nez Perce set up camp outside the town of Junction, Idaho.



"The Nez Perce came in here at 10 a.m., about 60 in number with Looking Glass and White Bird. We had a talk with them; they seem to be friendly disposed toward the citizens. They say for us to go home and attend our business. They say Joseph will be here today with 100 men."
(Jacob Yearian)

A small group of Lemhi Shoshone Indians acted as emissaries between Chief Looking Glass, White Bird, and the townspeople. The Nez Perce chiefs intended no harm and only wished to pass by in peace. They hoped to convince Chief Tendoy of the Lemhi Shoshone and his people to accompany them on their journey to the buffalo grounds. Chief Tendoy's only reply was a request that they leave as quickly as possible.



As you drop off Bannock Pass you follow Railroad Canyon down to Leadore, Idaho. Look around the hills for signs of the mining industry that brought settlement to this area. You are now on the Salmon-

Challis National Forest and at the end of the auto tour covered in this brochure. The Leadore Ranger District can provide travel information if you'd like to explore this area further.

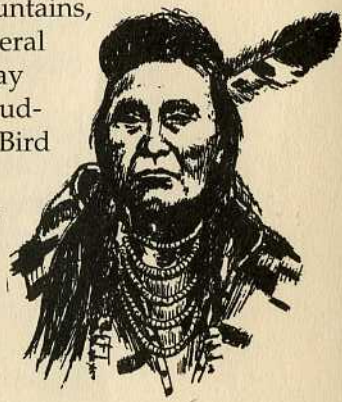
"Never to return home..."

THE REMAINING JOURNEY

From Junction, the weary Nez Perce headed south and east, hoping to put as much distance as possible between themselves and General Howard.

Several skirmishes followed as the Nez Perce struggled across Yellowstone Park and eastern Montana, pushing hard to reach Canada and the sanctuary they hoped to find. Only thirty miles from the Canadian border, those hopes were crushed.

Along Snake Creek, just north of the Bear Paw Mountains, the Nez Perce engaged the combined forces of General Nelson Miles and General Howard. During a six day siege many prominent Nez Perce leaders died, including Chief Looking Glass and Ollukut. Chief White Bird led a group to safety in Canada, where they joined Sitting Bull and members of the Sioux tribe. Sitting Bull and his people escaped to Canada one year earlier after helping defeat Lt. Colonel George A. Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn.



On October 5, 1877, Chief Joseph handed his rifle to General Miles. The Nez Perce War was over.

Following their surrender at Bear Paw Battlefield, the Nez Perce faced sickness, starvation, and death during eight years of exile in Oklahoma. During this time Chief Joseph became a powerful and eloquent spokesman pleading for the return of the surviving Nez Perce to their homelands. In 1885, they at last returned west, but not to their homes. Some were sent to the Nez Perce Reservation at Lapwai, Idaho, while Joseph and his people faced further banishment on the Colville Reservation in Washington, where he died on September 21, 1904.

For More Information:

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National Park Service
Big Hole National Battlefield
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Salmon-Challis National Forest
P.O. Box 729
Salmon, ID 83467
(208) 756-2215

Bureau of Land Management
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Dillon, MT 59725
(406) 683-2337

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