

The great Chief Joseph died broken-spirited and broken-hearted. He did not hate the whites, for there was nothing small about him. When he laid down his weapons he would not fight on with his mind. But he was profoundly disappointed in the claims of a Christian civilization.

I call him great because he was simple and honest. Without education or special training he demonstrated his ability to lead and to fight when justice demanded. He outgeneraled the best and most experienced commanders in the army of the United States, although their troops were well provisioned, well armed, and unencumbered. He was great finally, because he never boasted of his remarkable feat. I am proud of him, because he was a true American.

CHIEF JOSEPH



by
Charles A. Eastman



A LearningIsland.org
15-Minute biography

Editor: Jennifer Robinson

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Chief Joseph/Charles A Eastman

Summary: A brief look at the life of Chief Joseph, Nez Pierce leader.

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Chief Joseph in his later years.

sat up with him nearly all of one night. I may add here that we took the document to General Miles who was then stationed in Washington, before presenting it to the Department. The General said that every word of it was true.

In the first place, his people were to be kept at Fort Keogh, Montana, over the winter and then returned to their reservation. Instead they were taken to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and placed between a lagoon and the Missouri River. There the sanitary conditions made havoc with them. Those who did not die were then taken to the Indian Territory, where the health situation was even worse.

Joseph appealed to the government again and again. At last by the help of Bishops Whipple and Hare he was moved to the Colville reservation in Washington. Here the land was very poor, unlike their own fertile valley. General Miles said to the chief that he had recommended and urged that their agreement be kept. However, the politicians and the people who occupied the Indians' land declared they were afraid that if he returned he would break out again and murder innocent white settlers! What irony!

CHIEF JOSEPH

The Nez Perce tribe of Indians, was made up of several bands. Like other tribes too large to be united under one chief, each band had its own leader. It was a loose group of people.

Joseph and his people occupied the Imnaha or Grande Ronde valley in Oregon. This was considered perhaps the finest land in that part of the country.

When the last treaty was entered into by some of the bands of the Nez Perce, Joseph's band was at Lapwai, Idaho. They had nothing to do with the agreement. The elder chief in dying had counseled his son, then not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, never to part with their home. He assured him that he had signed no papers.

These peaceful non-treaty Indians did not even know what land had been given up until the agent

read them the government order to leave. Of course they refused. You and I would have done the same.

When the agent failed to move them, he and the would-be settlers called upon the army to force them to leave their inherited lands in the hands of a crowd of greedy people. General O. O. Howard, the Christian soldier, was sent to do the work.

He had a long talk with Joseph and his leading men. He told them they must obey the order or be driven out by force. We may be sure that he presented this hard alternative reluctantly.

Joseph was a mere youth without experience in war or public affairs. He had been well brought up in obedience to parental wisdom. With his brother Ollicut he had attended Missionary Spaulding's school where they had listened to the story of Christ and his religion of brotherhood. He now replied in his simple way that neither he nor his father had ever made any treaty disposing of their country. He added that no other band of the Nez Percés was authorized to speak for them, and it would seem a mighty injustice and unkindness to dispossess a friendly band.

General Howard told them in effect that they had no rights, no voice in the matter. They had

friendly Nez Perce scouts. They were directed to talk to Joseph in his own language. He decided that there was nothing to do but surrender.

He had believed that his escape was all but secure. Then at the last moment he was surprised and caught at a disadvantage. His army was shattered. He had lost most of the leaders in these various fights. His people, including children, women, and the wounded, had traveled thirteen hundred miles in about fifty days. He himself was a young man who had never before taken any important responsibility!

Even now he was not actually conquered. He was well entrenched. His people were willing to die fighting; but the army of the United States offered peace and he agreed, out of pity for his suffering people. Some of his warriors still refused to surrender and slipped out of the camp at night and through the lines.

Joseph had, as he told me, between three and four hundred fighting men in the beginning, which means over one thousand persons. Of these several hundred surrendered with him.

His own story of the conditions he made was prepared by himself with my help in 1897, when he came to Washington to present his grievances. I

daughter went with him. They discussed sending runners to Sitting Bull to ascertain his exact whereabouts and whether it would be agreeable to him to join forces with the Nez Perces. In the midst of the council, a force of United States cavalry charged down the hill between the two camps. This once Joseph was surprised. He had seen no trace of the soldiers and had somewhat relaxed his vigilance.

He told his little daughter to stay where she was. He cut right through the cavalry and rode up to his own teepee, where his wife met him at the door with his rifle. She cried: "Here is your gun, husband!"

The warriors quickly gathered and pressed the soldiers so hard that they had to withdraw. Meanwhile one set of the people fled. Joseph's own band entrenched themselves in a very favorable position from which they could not easily be dislodged.

General Miles had received and acted on General Howard's message. He sent one of his officers with some Indian scouts into Joseph's camp to negotiate with the chief.

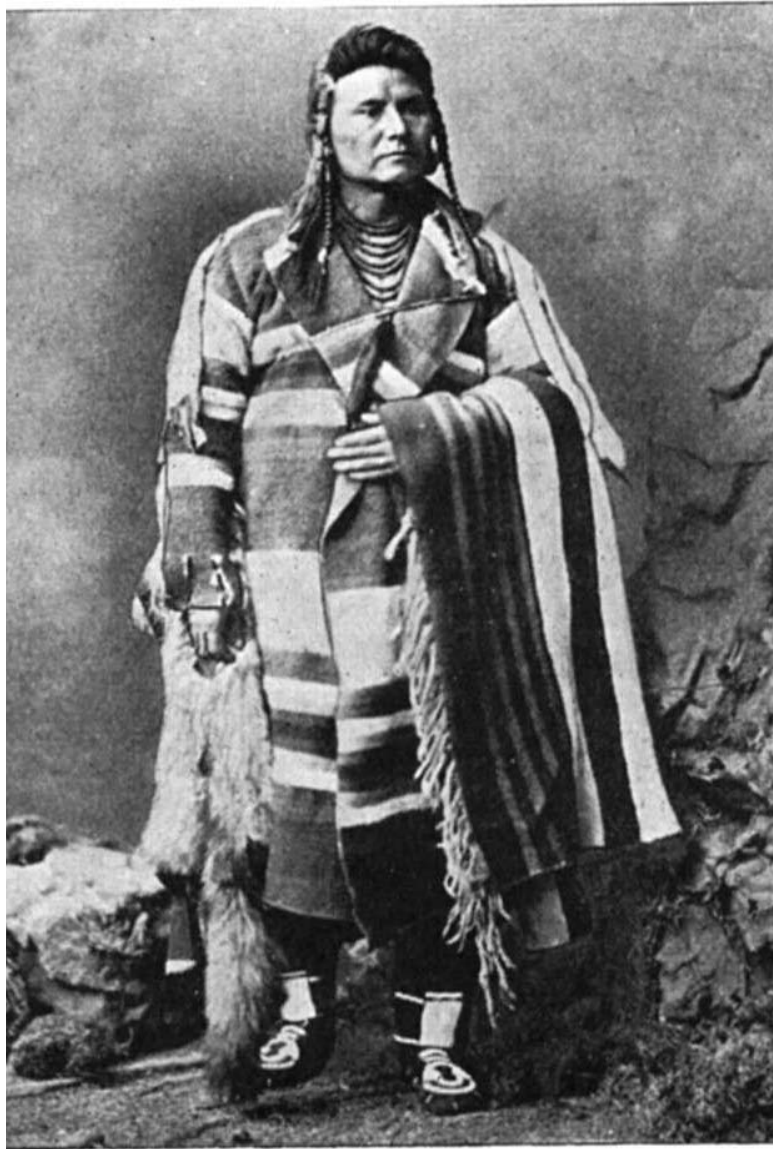
Meanwhile Howard and Sturgis came up with the encampment. Howard had with him two

only to obey. Although some of the lesser chiefs counseled revolt then and there, Joseph maintained his self-control. He sought to calm his people and groped for a peaceful settlement of their difficulties. He finally asked for thirty days' time in which to find and dispose of their stock. This was granted.

Joseph steadfastly held his immediate followers to their promise, but the land-grabbers were impatient. They did everything in their power to bring about an immediate crisis so as to hasten the eviction of the Indians. Depredations were committed, and finally the Indians, or some of them, retaliated. This was just what their enemies had been looking for.

There might be a score of white men murdered among themselves on the frontier. No outsider would ever hear about that, but if one were injured by an Indian -- "Down with the bloodthirsty savages!" was the cry.

Joseph told me himself that during all of those thirty days a tremendous pressure was brought upon him by his own people to resist the government order. "The worst of it was," said he, "that everything they said was true. Besides" -- he paused for a moment -- "it seemed very soon for



Chief Joseph.

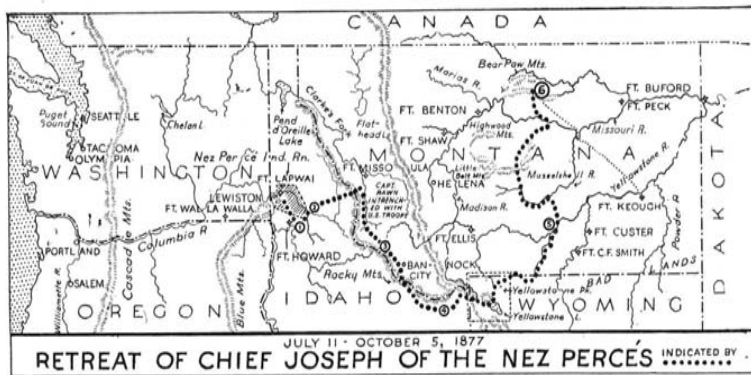
It is the general belief that Indians are cruel and revengeful. Surely these people had reason to hate the race who had driven them from their homes if any people ever had. Yet it is a fact that when Joseph met visitors and travelers in the Park, some of whom were women, he allowed them to pass unharmed. In at least one instance let them have horses.

He told me that he gave strict orders to his men not to kill any women or children. He wished to meet his adversaries according to their own standards of warfare. He afterward learned that in spite of professions of humanity, white soldiers have often been known to kill women and children indiscriminately.

Another remarkable thing about this noted retreat is that Joseph's people stood behind him to a man. Even the women and little boys each did their part. The latter were used as scouts in the immediate vicinity of the camp.

The Bittersweet valley, which they had now entered, was full of game. The Indians hunted for food, while resting their worn-out ponies.

One morning they had a council to which Joseph rode over bareback, as they had camped in two divisions a little apart. His fifteen-year-old



General Howard came upon the battle field soon afterward and saw that the Indians were off again. From here he sent fresh messages to General Miles, asking for reinforcements.

Joseph had now turned northeastward toward the Upper Missouri. He told me that when he got into that part of the country he knew he was very near the Canadian line. He could not be far from Sitting Bull, with whom he desired to form an alliance. He also believed that he had cleared all the forts.

Therefore he went more slowly and tried to give his people some rest. Some of their best men had been killed or wounded in battle, and the wounded were a great burden to him. Nevertheless they were carried and tended patiently all during this wonderful flight. Not one was ever left behind.

me to forget my father's dying words, 'Do not give up our home!'" Knowing as I do just what this would mean to an Indian, I felt for him deeply.

Among the opposition leaders were Too-hul-hul-sote, White Bird, and Looking Glass. All of them were strong men and respected by the Indians. On the other side were men built up by emissaries of the government for their own purposes. They were advertised as "great friendly chiefs."

As a rule such men are unworthy of leadership. This is so well known to the Indians that it makes them distrustful of the government's sincerity at the start. Moreover, while Indians unqualifiedly say what they mean, the whites have a hundred ways of saying what they do not mean.

The center of the storm was this simple young man, who so far as I can learn had never been upon the warpath. He stood firm for peace and obedience. As for his father's sacred dying charge, he told himself that he would not sign any papers, he would not go of his free will but from compulsion. This was his excuse.

However, the whites were unduly impatient to clear the coveted valley. By their insolence they aggravated to the danger point an already strained

situation. The murder of an Indian was the climax and this happened in the absence of the young chief. He returned to find the leaders determined to die fighting.

The nature of the country was in their favor and at least they could give the army a chase, but how long they could hold out they did not know. Even Joseph's younger brother Ollicut was won over. There was nothing for him to do but fight. Then and there began the peaceful Joseph's career as a general of unsurpassed strategy in conducting one of the most masterly retreats in history.

This is not my judgment, but the unbiased opinion of men whose knowledge and experience fit them to render it. Bear in mind that these people were not scalp hunters like the Sioux, Cheyennes, and Utes. They were peaceful hunters and fishermen. The first council of war was a strange business to Joseph. He had only this to say to his people:

"I have tried to save you from suffering and sorrow. Resistance means all of that. We are few. They are many. You can see all we have at a glance. They have food and ammunition in abundance. We must suffer great hardship and

Meanwhile another incident had occurred. Right under the eyes of the chosen scouts and vigilant sentinels, Joseph's warriors fired upon the army camp at night and ran off their mules. He went straight on toward the park, where Lieutenant Bacon let him get by. They passed through the narrow gateway without firing a shot.

Here again it was demonstrated that General Howard could not depend upon the volunteers. Many of them had joined him in the chase, and were going to show the soldiers how to fight Indians. In this night attack at Camas Meadow, they were demoralized. While crossing the river next day many lost their guns in the water, whereupon all packed up and went home. They left the army to be guided by the Indian scouts.

However, this succession of defeats did not discourage General Howard. He kept on with as many of his men as were able to carry a gun.

Meanwhile he was sending dispatches to all the frontier posts with orders to intercept Joseph if possible. Sturgis tried to stop him as the Indians entered the Park, but they did not meet until he was about to come out. Then there was another fight, with Joseph again victorious.

troops and pressed them close. He sent a party under his brother Ollicut to harass Gibbons' rear and rout the pack mules. This threw him on the defensive and caused him to send for help, while Joseph continued his masterly retreat toward the Yellowstone Park wilderness. However, this was but little advantage to him, since he must necessarily leave a broad trail.

The army was adding to its columns day by day with celebrated scouts, both white and Indian. Finally the two commands came together. Although General Howard says their horses were by this time worn out, and by inference the men as well, they persisted on the trail of a party encumbered by women and children, the old, sick, and wounded.

It was decided to send a detachment of cavalry under Bacon, to Tash Pass, the gateway of the National Park. Joseph would have to pass her. Howard gave orders to detain him there until the rest could come up with them.

Here is what General Howard says of the affair. "Bacon got into position soon enough but he did not have the heart to fight the Indians on account of their number."

loss." After this speech, he quietly began his plans for the defense.

The main plan of campaign was to engineer a successful retreat into Montana. There they would form a junction with the hostile Sioux and Cheyennes under Sitting Bull.

There was a relay scouting system. One set of scouts left the main body at evening. The second left a little before daybreak, passing the first set on some commanding hill top. There were also decoy scouts set to trap Indian scouts of the army. I notice that General Howard charges his Crow scouts with being unfaithful.

Their greatest difficulty was in meeting an unencumbered army, while carrying their women, children, and old men. They also carried supplies and such household effects as were absolutely necessary.

Joseph formed an auxiliary corps that was to effect a retreat at each engagement, upon a definite plan and in definite order. Meanwhile the unencumbered women were made into an ambulance corps to take care of the wounded.

It was decided that the main rear guard should meet General Howard's command in White Bird Canyon. Every detail was planned in advance, yet

left flexible according to Indian custom. This gave each leader freedom to act according to circumstances. Perhaps no better ambush was ever planned than the one Chief Joseph set for the shrewd and experienced General Howard. He expected to be hotly pursued, but he calculated that the pursuing force would consist of not more than two hundred and fifty soldiers.

He prepared false trails to mislead them into thinking that he was about to cross or had crossed the Salmon River. In truth he had no thought of doing so at that time.

Some of the tents were pitched in plain sight. While the women and children were hidden on the inaccessible ridges, the men were concealed in the canyon ready to fire upon the soldiers with deadly effect. This could be done with scarcely any danger to themselves. They could even roll rocks upon them.

In a very few minutes the troops had learned a lesson. The soldiers showed some fight, but a large body of frontiersmen who accompanied them were soon in disorder. The warriors chased them nearly ten miles, securing rifles and much ammunition, and killing and wounding many.

The Nez Perces next crossed the river. Then they made a detour and recrossed it at another point, and took their way eastward. All this was by way of delaying pursuit.

Joseph told me that he estimated it would take six or seven days to get a sufficient force in the field to take up their trail. The correctness of his reasoning is apparent from the facts as detailed in General Howard's book. He tells us that he waited six days for the arrival of men from various forts in his department. Then he followed Joseph with six hundred soldiers, a large number of citizen volunteers and his Indian scouts. As it was evident they had a long chase over trackless wilderness in prospect, he discarded his supply wagons and took pack mules instead. But by this time the Indians had a good start.

Meanwhile General Howard had sent a dispatch to Colonel Gibbons, with orders to head Joseph off. This he undertook to do at the Montana end of the Lolo Trail. The wily commander had no knowledge of this move, but he was not to be surprised. He was too brainy for his pursuers, whom he constantly outwitted.

He only gave battle when he was ready. There at the Big Hole Pass he met Colonel Gibbons' fresh