

Chief Joseph, 1840-1904: A Hero of Freedom for Native Americans, Part Two



SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: People in America, a program in Special English by the Voice of America. Every week at this time, we tell the story of a man or a woman who played an important part in the history of the United States. Today, Larry West and Warren Scheer complete the [story](#) of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce Indians.

(MUSIC)

WARREN SCHEER: In eighteen seventy-seven, the American government decided to move the Nez Perce Indians from their land in the northwestern part of the country. The government had set up a reservation for them in Idaho. Chief Joseph did not want to leave the land. It was holy ground. It contained the bones of his father and mother.

But, like his father in earlier times, Chief Joseph knew it would be hopeless to stay and defend the land. There were too few Indians to win a war against the white men.

And so in June of eighteen seventy-seven, the Nez Perce left their home in the Wallowa Valley. They left quickly. They were able to take only a small part of what they owned, and just a few cattle and Appaloosa horses.

LARRY WEST: When the Indians reached the Snake River, the water was very deep and ran very fast with melted snow from the mountains. Chief Joseph and his people made boats from sticks and dried animal skins to cross the river. While the Indians were busy, a group of white men came and stole some of the cattle waiting at the edge of the river.

The other chiefs demanded that Joseph call a meeting. Two of the chiefs, White Bird and Toohoolhoolzote, spoke for War.

But Joseph said, "It is better to live at peace than to begin a war and lie dead."

WARREN SCHEER: Some of the young men in White Bird's group were very angry. That night, they rode into the countryside and killed eleven white persons.

During all his years as chief, Joseph had tried to keep the peace. Now he saw there was no hope. Although he and his young men had taken no part in the killings, he knew that the white men would blame all of the Indians. Chief Joseph said, "I would have given my own life if I could have undone the killing of the white men."

Many Nez Perce fled. Chief Joseph remained, because his wife was about to have a baby. After she gave birth, he and his brother and their families joined the others in White Bird Canyon to the south.

LARRY WEST: Joseph wanted to lead the people to safety in the flat lands of Montana. But the United States army quickly sent horse soldiers to follow them.

The troops rode all night. They were extremely tired when they reached White Bird Canyon. An Indian -- carrying a white flag -- walked forward to meet them. A soldier shot him.

With that shot, war between the Nez Perce and the United States began.

WARREN SCHEER: The young Nez Perce men were skilled with their guns. They knew the land. And they were calm in battle. The army officers did not know the land. And they were not wise. When the soldiers attacked, they fired on Indian women and children.

The two sides fought hard. The soldiers could not defeat the Indians.

Joseph, White Bird and Toohoolhoolzote led their people across the mountains to join another Nez Perce group led by Chief Looking Glass. Together, the Nez Perce forces then numbered more than two-hundred-fifty warriors.

The chiefs met. They knew they could not return home. They decided to lead their people to Canada. And so they headed north, always keeping their horses in front of them. The chiefs believed the soldiers would not follow them again.

LARRY WEST: The chiefs did not know, however, that army officials in Washington were discussing the situation. The officials did not understand why the United States army could not capture several hundred Indians.

So they decided to send General William Tecumseh Sherman -- a hero of the Civil War -- to find out.

The Indians continued to move toward Canada, battling groups of soldiers along the way.

When the Indians reached the great Yellowstone Park, General Sherman himself was waiting for them. His troops closed every road out of the park. But Joseph, with his people and their horses, escaped through the trees.

WARREN SCHEER: General Sherman sent word by telegraph to other army commanders along the Indians' way north. At one place in the mountains, the Indians found a group of soldiers building a wall across the only road.

Joseph, White Bird and Looking Glass rode down to the wall and spoke to the officers. The chiefs told them: "We are going by you without fighting if you will let us. But we are going by you anyhow."

The soldiers would not let the Indians pass. Fighting broke out. And, again, the Indian warriors defeated the white soldiers.

Joseph was not a military man. In fact, before the war against the American army, Joseph had never been in battle. But he understood human nature. He understood his enemy. And he was able to unite his warriors and his people.

LARRY WEST: Many weeks after the Nez Perce had left their home lands, they reached the Bear Paw Mountains. They were only eighty kilometers from Canada. The Nez Perce were close to their goal. But safety was not yet in sight.

Six-hundred army troops, under the command of General Nelson Miles, were waiting at Bear Paw.

The soldiers attacked two times on the first day. They were beaten back two times. Joseph's brother was killed in the fighting, as well as Toohoolhoolzote and some of the other chiefs.

After the long march and so many battles, only eighty-seven warriors remained. Many of the women and children were wounded or sick. Most of the horses were dead.

The weather turned cold in the mountains. The wind blew, and it began to snow.

General Miles sent a message to Chief Joseph. He said: "If you will come out and give up your arms, I will not harm you, and will send you to the reservation."

WARREN SCHEER: Chief Joseph would not give up. The battle continued. On the fourth day, Chief Looking Glass was hit by a bullet and died. On the fifth day, Chief Joseph rode out -- alone -- to the snowy battlefield. He surrendered. He said:

"I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. It is cold, and we have no blankets. Some of my people have run away to the hills. No one knows where they are. I want to have time to look for my children. Hear me, my chiefs! My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands. . . I will fight no more forever. "

LARRY WEST: Two days after Chief Joseph surrendered, the government ordered him and his people far away.

First, they went to an army base in Kansas. Then they went to a dry and empty piece of land in Oklahoma. Within a year, almost half the people died. Joseph buried all of his children.

Years later, Chief Joseph and his people were permitted to return to the northwest. But they were not permitted to return home.

Joseph spoke to American officials. Nothing changed. He could never go back to the holy ground that held the bones of his father and mother. He lived in the northwest -- in exile -- until September, nineteen-oh-four, when he died.

WARREN SCHEER: Chief Joseph's words expressed the ideas of justice and civil rights. . . Even though he lived in a time when he could not have those rights himself. He said:

"Treat all men alike. Give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. The earth is the mother of all people. And all people should have equal rights upon it. Then the great spirit chief who rules above will smile upon

this land, and send rain to wash out the bloody spots made by brothers' hands upon the face of the earth."

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SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: You have been listening to the VOA Special English program, People in America, and its story of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce Indians. You narrators were Larry West and Warren Scheer. Our program was written by Barbara Dash. This is Shirley Griffith.