

CHIEF JOSEPH—NEZ PERCE INDIAN CHIEF 1840-1904

Chief Joseph, known by his people as Heinmot Tooyalakekt (In-mut-too-yah-lat-lat), was the chief and leader of the Wallamwatin Band of the Lower Nez Perce. His name meant “Thunder Traveling to Loftier Mountain Heights.” Joseph was a remarkable leader who had learned habits of long thought, speaking and acting carefully, and being cautious in his dealing with others, which took him to loftier heights as a leader.

After the discovery of gold, the Nez Perce reservation had been greatly reduced in size. The Nez Perce refused to sign the treaty of 1863, but the government insisted that they be confined within new boundaries. Chief Joseph was told that he must sell his land or move his people to a different reservation. Joseph refused to do either and, facing slaughter by the U.S. Army, he attempted to move his many people to Canada. His hope was that they would be able to evade the army and then return to their land later, in peace.

This remarkable effort consisted of traveling a route of about fifteen hundred miles through mountain and forest, while being consistently trailed by the U.S. army. When they were within thirty miles of Canada they stopped to rest, being tired and weary. Thinking they were way ahead of the army, they were very surprised when an attack began. After five days, and many casualties, the two groups met to discuss the terms of the surrender.

Joseph was promised that if he surrendered his people would be allowed to return to their reservation in Idaho in the spring. Joseph, in his statement of surrender, said:

“Tell General Howard I know his heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. The old men are all killed. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. 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.”

The “white man” was not true to his word and, although Joseph did not physically fight, he continued to fight with words. His people were sent to camps and reservations where they died of disease and grief. He petitioned the government to return his people to their land. His petitions were ignored. Chief Joseph traveled to Washington to plead the case of his people. Through speeches and interviews, he made many aware of the injustices that had occurred to his people. After time, his plight led to some of his people being returned to their reservation.

Joseph never gave up hope of returning to the land of his fathers, and he spent the remainder of his life trying to convince federal authorities that his tribe should be returned their land.

This remarkable leader, brave warrior, influential spokesman, and great man never returned to that land “where most of my friends are sleeping their last sleep.” Chief Joseph had been born into freedom but he spent half his life a prisoner of reservation boundaries. He died on a reservation in Colesville, Washington, where he was buried. He was said to have died of a “broken heart.”