

CHAPTER
5

AMERICAN LIVES **Chief Joseph**
Spokesman for His People

Section 1

"The old men are all dead. [My brother] who led the young men is dead. It is cold, and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. . . . From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."—Chief Joseph, speech when surrendering to the U.S. Army, October 5, 1877

Chief Joseph (c. 1840–1904), a leader of the Nez Perce [nĕz' pĕrs'] tribe, wanted to preserve his people's homeland. When white pressure for the land became too strong, he tried to lead his people to safety. Both efforts, however, failed.

The Nez Perce lived in peace near the Oregon/Washington border. By the 1860s, though, settlers wanted their rich land. Some Nez Perce bands gave up their land, but a chief named Old Joseph refused to yield the fertile Wallowa Valley. In 1871, he died and his two sons took control of the band. The older son, also Joseph, had the Native American name Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekht ("thunder coming from water over land") and held civil but not military authority.

When white settlers moved into the Wallowa Valley, Joseph protested to the government. President Ulysses S. Grant ruled that the valley was part of a reservation that belonged to the Nez Perce. Whites refused to leave, however, and two years later a new presidential order reversed the previous one. Joseph appealed to the government again. He impressed General Oliver Howard and others with his eloquent defense of his people's claim to their land. But they ruled against him. Howard ordered Joseph and his people to leave—in 30 days. Joseph calmed tempers and moved his people. Then, while camped near the reservation, angry younger warriors attacked and killed 20 settlers.

Thinking that war was now inevitable, Joseph agreed to join the warriors. This began a 1,700-mile journey that lasted many months and was marked by several Nez Perce victories over the pursuing army. Newspapers reported incorrectly that Joseph was the military leader and main strategist. He did take part in discussions among chiefs, and he led the defenses of the Nez Perce camps. However, he mainly represented the tribe in meetings with army officers. Thus, his name—Chief Joseph—entered news accounts.

The Nez Perce band, several hundred strong,

moved eastward. After defeating the army at White Bird Canyon in Idaho, they were joined by another band that had left the reservation after an unprovoked attack by the army. They gained fighters—and also gained more women and children. They beat back the pursuing Howard at the Clearwater River and then moved into Montana. After a costly victory along the Big Hole River in Montana, they turned south.

The Nez Perce had hoped to make an alliance with the Crow but were unable to reach an agreement. The chiefs decided to head for Canada, hoping to join with Sitting Bull and his Sioux. They had to cross Montana from south to north, but supplies were running low and the cold coming in. They repelled another army attack at Canyon Creek and raced north. Howard had telegraphed for army units throughout the area to join the chase. Finally, just 30 miles south of the Canadian border, they were trapped by an overwhelming force of soldiers. The Nez Perce caused heavy casualties but suffered high losses of their own. When Howard and reinforcements arrived, Joseph and the remaining Nez Perce surrendered.

Many of the Nez Perce died when they were moved to the Indian Territory. But their long trek had roused popular sympathy, which persuaded the government to allow them to resettle in the Northwest. Joseph lived almost 30 more years but he never again lived in the Wallowa Valley.

Questions

1. What caused the Nez Perce war?
2. Would you describe Joseph's role as primarily political or military? Include details to support your view.
3. What aspects of the flight of Chief Joseph and his band do you think aroused popular sympathy and why?