



Chief Joseph

As remembered by Ohiyesa (Charles A. Eastman)

The Nez Perce tribe of Indians, like other tribes too large to be united under one chief, was composed of several bands, each distinct in sovereignty. It was a loose confederacy. Joseph and his people occupied the Imnaha or Grande Ronde valley in Oregon, which 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, and 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, assuring him that he had signed no papers. These peaceful non-

treaty Indians did not even know what land had been ceded 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 be good, namely, without a murmur to leave their pleasant inheritance in the hands of a crowd of greedy grafters. General O. O. Howard, the Christian soldier, was sent to do the work. He had a long council with Joseph and his leading men, telling 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 and with his brother Ollicut 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, that no other band of the Nez Perces 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 only to obey. Although some of the lesser chiefs counseled revolt then and there, Joseph maintained his self-control, seeking to calm his people, and still groping for a peaceful settlement of their difficulties. He finally asked for thirty days' time in which to find and dispose of their stock, and this was granted.

Joseph steadfastly held his immediate followers to their promise, but the land-grabbers were impatient, and 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, which was just what their enemies had been looking for. There might be a score of white men murdered among themselves on the frontier and no outsider would ever hear about it, 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 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 strong men and respected by the Indians; while

on the other side were men built up by emissaries of the government for their own purposes and advertised as "great friendly chiefs." As a rule such men are unworthy, and 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, and 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, and this was his excuse.

However, the whites were unduly impatient to clear the coveted valley, and 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; and 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, but 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 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 and there form a junction with the hostile Sioux and Cheyennes under Sitting Bull. There was a relay scouting system, one set of scouts leaving the main body at evening and the second 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, with supplies and such household effects as were absolutely necessary. Joseph formed an auxiliary

corps that was to affect a retreat at each engagement, upon a definite plan and in definite order, while 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, and every detail was planned in advance, yet left flexible according to Indian custom, giving 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, which he had no thought of doing at that time. Some of the tents were pitched in plain sight, while the women and children were hidden on the inaccessible ridges, and the men concealed in the canyon ready to fire upon the soldiers with deadly effect 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 Percés next crossed the river, made a detour and recrossed it at another point, then 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, and 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 followed Joseph with six hundred soldiers, beside 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, which 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, and only gave battle when he was ready. There at the Big Hole Pass he met Colonel Gibbons' fresh troops and pressed them close. He sent a party under his brother Ollicut to harass Gibbons' rear and rout the pack mules, thus throwing him on the defensive and causing him to

send for help, while Joseph continued his masterly retreat toward the Yellowstone Park, then a wilderness. However, this was but little advantage to him, since he must necessarily leave a broad trail, and the army was augmenting its columns day by day with celebrated scouts, both white and Indian. The two commands came together, and 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, which Joseph would have to pass, with 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." 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 and pass through the narrow gateway without firing a shot.

Here again it was demonstrated that General Howard could not depend upon the volunteers, many of whom 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, and while crossing the river next day many lost their guns in the water, whereupon all packed up and went home, leaving the army to be guided by the Indian scouts.

However, this succession of defeats did not discourage General Howard, who kept on with as many of his men as were able to carry a gun, meanwhile 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, when there was another fight, with Joseph again victorious. General Howard came upon the battle field soon afterward and saw that the Indians were off again, and 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 and 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.

It is the general belief that Indians are cruel and revengeful, and 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, and 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, but he afterward learned that in spite of professions of humanity, white soldiers have not seldom 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, and even the women and little boys did each his 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, and 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 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, and himself cut right through the cavalry and rode up to his own teepee, where his wife met him at the door with his rifle, crying: "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 while 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, and he now sent one of his officers with some Indian scouts into Joseph's camp to negotiate with the chief. Meantime Howard and Sturgis came up with the encampment, and Howard had with him two friendly Nez Perce scouts who 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, and he himself 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, as he said, 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, and 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 sat up with him nearly all of one night; and 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, where 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, and at last through 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, but the politicians and the people who occupied the Indians' land declared they were afraid if he returned he would break out again and murder innocent white settlers! What irony!

The great Chief Joseph died broken-spirited and broken-hearted. He did not hate the whites, for there was nothing small about him, and 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 above all 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, as Remembered by Ohiyesa (Charles A. Eastman)

Chief Joseph, known by his people as In-mut-too-yah-lat-lat (Thunder coming up over the land from the water), was best known for his resistance to the U.S. Government's attempts to force his tribe onto reservations. The Nez Perce were a peaceful nation spread from Idaho to Northern Washington. The tribe had maintained good relations with the whites after the Lewis and Clark expedition. Joseph spent much of his early childhood at a mission maintained by Christian missionaries.

In 1855 Chief Joseph's father, Old Joseph, signed a treaty with the U.S. that allowed his people to retain much of their traditional lands. In 1863 another treaty was created that severely reduced the amount of land, but Old Joseph maintained that this second treaty was never agreed to by his people.

A showdown over the second "non-treaty" came after Chief Joseph assumed his role as Chief in 1877. After months of fighting and forced marches, many of the Nez Perce were sent to a reservation in what is now Oklahoma, where many died from malaria and starvation.

Chief Joseph tried every possible appeal to the federal authorities to return the Nez Perce to the land of their ancestors. In 1885, he was sent along with many of his band to a reservation in Washington where, according to the reservation doctor, he later died of a broken heart.

Chief Joseph by Brookie Craig

Chief Joseph, was kept captive, never being allowed to return to his Nez Perce Homeland even though General Miles promised he could live in Idaho. Chief Joseph is buried on the Colville Reservation in Washington and today I visited his grave to do ceremony.

The small village there consists of one gas station, very few houses and no businesses, very desolate in a unforgiving country of arid, desert surroundings. His grave sits on a small hill surrounded by others of the People, most without headstones, but some with small rocks marking their final resting place.

I find him easily, sensing to know exactly where to go and he is buried under the only tree in the cemetery, a sort of gnarled, broken, old, withered tree. A marker is there, furnished by Western Washington University in 1906, a few months after he died in 1905 at the age of 60, alone and forgotten by most of that time.

A sense of profound sadness captures me as I sit by the neglected grave of

one of our People's greatest Leaders. Long ago items are now withered and decaying and were left by those who do now remember his greatness, scattered in disarray, cluttering the ground in their glory to him.

Arrows, beads, plastic roses, feathers, strips of decaying cloths, a Colville Reservation emblem jacket, hanging on the tree, many cigarettes stained by rains, or teardrops, a plastic water bottle, a priceless bone necklace draped on the tombstone, rocks, hand drawn pictures, private written messages held down by rocks and countless coins, strewn all around broken vases holding stems of sage.

No one seems to clean up around it. It bothers me to know that this great leader is neglected as I sit caressed in the cool shadows of that ancient tree and I try to understand it all.

I notice that they even buried him facing West and not East towards his homeland. I weep, my tears joining countless unknown others who have felt the pain there. I tell him I hope he has found his peace and the winds begin to come. Another there with me, who is watching from a respectful distance tells me later I have spoken aloud, "He is here." The winds become stronger and he tells me later that they suddenly change direction, coming from the North, the direction they captured and brought him here from.

The light is dimming; I look up and shade my eyes, looking over the horizon hills, seeing in my heart his figure on a pony. Silently I watch and continue with the sage and cedar and feel an overwhelming sense of sacredness like I have never felt before. I look up in the overhanging branches and see the long deserted birds nest and the sky shows clear. Through its twigs I see the Nez Perce in their long retreat, fighting, struggling to reach freedom and asylum with Sitting Bull across the Border in Canada, for 105 days, always moving, 700 people, women, children, elderly, walking 1,800 miles only to be captured within 50 miles of their destination and freedom. Captured only because he was forced to surrender, refusing to leave the sick and dying of his People there, alone.

I remember that his tactics were so brilliant they are taught to this day at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and as I clear the decay from the ground which holds him captive, my heart remembers his words, "From where this sun now stands, I shall fight no more forever."

I watch the sun leaving me and, the shadow of this warrior falls back into the mountains. I touch the ground which caresses him, and weep for a man who believed in the goodness of others, who wanted nothing more than freedom, who was so great that an entire People walked those tortuous miles in freezing sleet and snows, who was never allowed to see his home again, and these words come strong to my heart to share with you, spoken

from that sacred place:

"We live, we die, and like the grass and trees, renew ourselves from the soft clods of the grave. Stones crumble and decay, faiths grow old and they are forgotten but new beliefs are born. The faith of the villages is dust now, but it will grow again, like the trees. May serenity circle on silent wings and catch the whisper of the winds."

I turn and leave honor in my farewell as the shadows take him back. Now I shall miss him even more.

Quotes from Chief Joseph

"The earth is our mother. She should not be disturbed by hoe or plough. We want only to subsist on what she freely gives us. Our fathers gave us many laws, which they had learned from their fathers. These laws were good. I have carried a heavy load on my back ever since I was a boy. I realized then that we could not hold our own with the white men. We were like deer. They were like grizzly bears. We had small country. Their country was large. We were contented to let things remain as the Great Spirit Chief made them. They were not, and would change the rivers and mountains if they did not suit them."

"Our fathers gave us many laws, which they had learned from their fathers. These laws were good. They told us to treat all people as they treated us; that we should never be the first to break a bargain; that it was a disgrace to tell a lie; that we should speak only the truth; that it was a shame for one man to take another his wife or his property without paying for it."

"We were contented to let things remain as the Great Spirit made them."

"Suppose a white man should come to me and say, Joseph, I like your horses. I want to buy them. I say to him, No, my horses suit me; I will not sell them. Then he goes to my neighbor and says, Pay me money, and I will sell you Joseph's horses. The white man returns to me and says, Joseph, I have bought your horses and you must let me have them. If we sold our lands to the government, this is the way they bought them."

"I am not a child, I think for myself. No man can think for me."

"If you tie a horse to a stake, do you expect him to grow fat? If you pen an Indian up on a small spot of earth, and compel him to stay there, he will not be contented, nor will he grow and prosper."

“The earth and myself are of one mind.”

“We were taught to believe that the Great Spirit sees and hears everything, and that he never forgets, that hereafter he will give every man a spirit home according to his deserts; If he has been a good man, he will have a good home; if he has been a bad man, he will have a bad home. This I believe, and all my people believe the same.”

“Good words do not last long unless they amount to something. Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country, now overrun by white men. They do not protect my father’s grave. They do not pay for all my horses and cattle. Good words cannot give me back my children. Good words will not give my people good health and stop them from dying. Good words will not get my people a home where they can live in peace and take care of themselves. I am tired of talk that comes to nothing It makes my heart sick when I remember all the good words and all the broken promises. There has been too much talking by men who had no right to talk.”

“It does not require many words to speak the truth.”

“We do not want churches because they will teach us to quarrel about God, as the Catholics and Protestants do. We do not want that. We may quarrel with men about things on earth, but we never quarrel about the Great Spirit.”

“I believe much trouble and blood would be saved if we opened our hearts more. I will tell you in my way how the Indian sees things. The white man has more words to tell you how they look to him, but it does not require many words to seek the truth.”

“Too many misinterpretations have been made... too many misunderstandings...”

“The Great Spirit Chief who rules above all will smile upon this land... and this time the Indian race is waiting and praying.”

“If the white man wants to live in peace with the Indian...we can live in peace. There need be no trouble. Treat all men alike, give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. You might as well

expect the rivers to run backward as that any man who is born a free man should be contented when penned up and denied liberty to go where he pleases. We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. Let me be a free man... free to travel... free to stop...free to work...free to choose my own teachers...free to follow the religion of my Fathers...free to think and talk and act for myself."

"Perhaps you think the Creator sent you here to dispose of us as you see fit. If I thought you were sent by the Creator I might be induced to think you had a right to dispose of me. Do not misunderstand me, but understand fully with reference to my affection for the land. I never said the land was mine to do with as I choose. The one who has a right to dispose of it is the one who has created it. I claim a right to live on my land and accord you the privilege to return to yours. Brother, we have listened to your talk coming from the father in Washington, and my people have called upon me to reply to you. And in the winds which pass through these aged pines, we hear the moaning of their departed ghosts.

And if the voices of our people could have been heard, that act would never have been done. But alas, though they stood around, they could neither be seen nor heard.

Their tears fell like drops of rain. I hear my voice in the depths of the forest, but no answering voice comes back to me. All is silent around me. My words must therefore be few. I can say no more. He is silent, for he has nothing to answer when the sun goes down."

Protecting Chief Josephs Grave

Among the Nez Perce a great respect is attributed to the deceased and every effort is extended to insure protection of Chief Joseph's grave. In 1928, the descendents of the Wallowa Band and Joseph's descendents got together to talk over the matter of protecting Chief Joseph's grave. It was decided that it should be moved to the edge of Wallowa Lake. When the family had exhumed the body, they had discovered Joseph's skull had been removed. They had suspected as much because of some rumored reports about it having been on display somewhere. To this day, no one seems to know where it is. Several family members remember some names and people and it may yet be possible to find out where the skull is and who took it.

While I was working at the Wallowa-Whitman Nat Forest, a group of people were wanting to purchase land immediately adjacent to Old Joseph's grave site. The intent was to develop condos and such as the area next to

the lake is the most prime land anywhere in northeast Oregon. Since that time, many others have joined in and want to cash in on the development. It is certainly an understatement on my part to say that the Wallowa is sacred to my family and descendents of the Wallowa Band Nez Perce. That land contains the spirit of our people. Now it seems everybody wants to cash in on the Nez Perce history. When I think about it, I just get angry and I want to bite my tongue off for fear of saying bad things!

If people knew the true reasons why the whites wanted the Wallowa and pressured the government for the removal of the Nez Perce then they would understand the greed that now grips them.

Yox Kalo'

(That's all)

Phil E. Minthorn, Descendent of Chief Joseph

Cayuse/Nez Perce

Wallowa Band