

## **1877 Skirmishes at Cottonwood**

The Skirmish at Cottonwood – A previously unpublished eyewitness account of an engagement of the Nez Perce War, **by George Shearer**

**Edited by Francis Haines**

IN 1855, THE NEZ PERCES went to governor Isaac I. Stevens' great treaty council with a record of fifty years of friendship toward Americans. They came away from that meeting with a spacious reservation which included most of central Idaho, plus substantial portions of southeastern Washington and northeastern Oregon. When the treaty was finally ratified by the Senate in 1859 and the first treaty payments were made in 1860, the tribe looked forward to years of peaceful adjustment.

But September, 1860, brought the discovery of gold at Orofino creek, on the eastern boundary of the new reservation, and soon the Nez Perce lands were overrun by thousands of prospectors and settlers. Tension developed when the newcomers ignored the terms of the treaty and the Federal officials stood by, making no effort to protect the rights of the Nez Perces against the encroaching whites.

Finally the government officials thought that much of the problem could be settled if the Nez Perces could be induced to give up more than half their reservation, so recently established, in return for small annual payments. A treaty council was set up at Fort Lapwai, some fifteen miles east of Lewiston, Idaho, in the summer of 1863 with this goal in mind.

Soon it was apparent that about half the tribe, whose homes would be included within the boundaries of the smaller reservation, were in favor of the new treaty, while the other half, who would have to give up their homes, were opposed. At this impasse the Nez Perce leaders agreed to disband the tribal structure set up by Dr. Elijah White in 1842, and allow each separate band to decide whether it would sign the new treaty. Hence in 1863 the tribe was divided into two factions, known to the government officials as the treaty bands and the non-treaty bands.

For the most part the treaty bands were more sedentary and peaceful. They had adopted more of the white man's ways and the white man's religion. The non-treaty bands, on the other hand, were semi-nomadic. They hunted the buffalo in central Montana and fought with the Plains tribes there. In general, they kept more of the old tribal culture, and in religion they tended toward the "dreamer" cult of Smohalla.

The principal non-treaty bands lived along the Salmon river from Riggins to Whitebird, and in the Wallowa country of Oregon. One small band lived near the mouth of the Palouse river. They all refused treaty payments, even those due under the treaty of 1855, and they refused to obey the Indian agents. They claimed that they were not bound by the treaty of 1863 since they did not sign it; the U.S. Indian agents maintained that the whole tribe was bound because a majority of the leaders had signed.

AFTER MANY YEARS of bickering, the matter came to a climax in 1877. That spring John Monteith, Indian agent at Lapwai, and General Oliver O. Howard, commander of the Department of the Columbia, attempted to force all the non-treaty bands onto the smaller reservation by June 15. General Howard assembled an imposing number of troops. He particularly expected resistance from the Wallowa band under Chief Joseph, and so he placed two companies of cavalry near Joseph's camp.

Early in June, 1877, the non-treaty bands began to assemble at Lake Tolo on Camas Prairie, just outside the reservation. Here they planned to have one last fling, with gambling, horse racing, and dancing, before settling down under the stern rule of John Monteith, who frowned on all such activities. When the Wallowa band rounded up its stock and moved across the Snake and Salmon rivers to join the assembled throng, General Howard thought his troubles were over.

Suddenly, trouble exploded. Rebellious young men from the Salmon river bands made two raids against the settlers who had taken up land along the river, killing about twenty whites. The whole northwest burst into an uproar. General Howard, at Fort Lapwai, immediately began to assemble his available forces at the spot, and asked the War Department for reinforcements. Meanwhile he ordered Captain<sup>1</sup> David Perry to take two companies of the First Cavalry and attack the Nez Perce camp.

After an all night march in the rain, Captain Perry reached Lake Tolo only to find that the camp had broken up. The Salmon river bands, with a few others, had moved across the ridge and were camped on Whitebird Creek. Urged on by the settlers at Grangeville, Captain Perry marched his weary men across the ridge in the night and approached the Nez Perce camp for an attack on the morning of June 17, 1877. He had a force of ninety-nine soldiers and eleven civilian volunteers.

Perry found that he could not surprise the Nez Perce camp, so he chose an open spot about a mile away and drew up his men. The Nez Perces, with about sixty-five men, mounted and charged. In a few moments Perry's poorly trained command had become a fleeing rabble, losing thirty-four killed and four wounded. The Indian loss was two slightly wounded.

By June 28, General Howard had an effective force of about four hundred soldiers and a hundred packers assembled on Camas Prairie. He then moved against the hostile camp on Whitebird creek in an attempt to capture or kill the Indians. The Nez Perces, although burdened with hundreds of non-combatants and a huge horse herd, eluded the troops quite easily. They crossed the turbulent Salmon and waited in sight for Howard to follow – which he did on July 1.

To follow the pattern of events during the next few days it is necessary to keep in mind that the Nez Perces had no idea that they were at war with the entire United States government. They thought they were having a little private

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<sup>1</sup> Casual reads may be confused by the fact that some of these officers had three different ranks: a "brevet" or honorary rank; a *field* rank during the Civil War; and a *field* rank in 1877. In this introduction, actual field rank at the time is used.

war with General Howard, and that they could terminate this war at any time by leaving Howard's department. To disengage, they naturally considered joining the Crow Indians in Montana. They were familiar with the Montana buffalo country and were friends with the Crow tribe. But to go to Montana they needed to reach the western end of Lolo trail, and this involved crossing Camas Prairie. They had not yet definitely decided to leave Idaho, but they wanted to be free to do so if they should choose such a course.

Camas Prairie is a broad, gently rolling plateau some fifteen hundred feet about the Salmon river to the south and the Clearwater river to the northeast. It is bordered on the west by Cottonwood Butte, which marks beginning of a high, rough, timbered ridge which continues unbroken for thirty miles to the canyon of the Snake river. On the southeast a higher, rougher ridge rises just beyond Grangeville and stretches south and east for forty miles. At the foot of Cottonwood Butte was a stage station, Norton's ranch, now known as the town of Cottonwood. From here the plateau stretched smooth and unobstructed for fifteen miles to Grangeville.

The Nez Perces, their fighting force now augmented to about 120 men, realized they could not transport their hundreds of non-combatants and thousands of horses across this open plateau if General Howard were free to attack them on the march. Hence their clever manoeuvre to decoy General Howard and his main body of troops into the very rough, wild country south of the Salmon river. Once Howard started to cross the Salmon on July 1, he could not even threaten the Nez Perces with his main force until he reached Grangeville on July 8.

As soon as the Nez Perces were assured that General Howard was following them across the river, they hurried twenty-five miles downstream to Craig's Ferry, and crossed to the right bank. This placed them south and west of Cottonwood Butte, and within easy marching distance of Camas Prairie. General Howard was unable to cross at Craig's Ferry.

General Howard's base was at Fort Lapwai. Pack trains from that place and from Lewiston brought supplies to him. To protect the trail and the supplies, Howard stationed Captain Stephen G. Whipple with two companies of First Cavalry at Norton's ranch, now Cottonwood. When rumors reached Captain Whipple that the Nez Perces had recrossed the Salmon, he sent out Charles Blewett and William Foster, two young civilian scouts, to locate the hostile band.

The scouts found the Nez Perces near Craig's Ferry. An alert guard killed Blewett, but Foster managed to escape and to reach Cottonwood with the news. Captain Whipple then sent him to lead a patrol of ten cavalry-men under Lt. Sevier M. Rains toward the Indian camp. A short distance west of camp they met the main Nez Perce fighting force preparing to attack Whipple's position. Lt. Rains and his entire party were wiped out in a few minutes. This was on July 3.

Our stage is now set for the appearance of George M. Shearer.

[Editor's note: Shearer's report, which follows, has been printed exactly as he wrote it.]

Mt Idaho July 26, 1877

Maj: E. C. Mason, 21st. Infty A. A. I. G.

Dear Sir,

I was at Mt Idaho on the morning of July 4<sup>th</sup> when the Sad news was received of the massacre of Lieutenant Reinz and his companions. Captain Chapman myself and four others, immediately Saddled our horses and Started for Head Quarters of Col. Whipple.<sup>2</sup> Arrived at Cottonwood house at about 1 P.M. found the premises abandoned, and the trail of the Col. And his Command indicated that they had gone in the direction of Lewiston: we followed on for about 3 miles and met Col Whipple's Command in Company with Col. Perry and a Squad of Soldiers,<sup>3</sup> who had just arrived from Fort Lapwai and were enroute for Cottonwood. We ascertained that Col Whipple had gone out for the purpose of meeting Col Perry and his men, who were in charge of pack train, and escorting them into Cottonwood. We turned back with the command and had gone but a Short distance, when we discovered an Indian some 7 or 8 hundred yards to our left. We continued our march toward the Cottonwood house, and by the time we had reached that place, the Indians had become quite numerous on the Surrounding hills. Between 4 & 5 oclock they commenced firing upon us – where upon Col. Perry who was in Command among other things, ordered 28 men into the rifle pit that had hitherto been constructed on the bluff near and to the South of the house, also 10 men in another put nearby, on the Same bluff. He then requested me to take command of the men in Said pits, and directed me to instruct them to obey my orders – I complied with his request. I had been there but a Short time, when I become convinced that the position I occupied, was the keystone to the entire fortification and that the Indians were aware of this fact, and were consequently concentrating their whole force against it. I thought it strange that a Civilian Should be placed in Such an important position, to the exclusion of experienced army officers, and particularly So, when So many of them were unoccupied or Seemed to be idle in the gulch below where there was no danger So long as the position I held was kept from the possession of the enemy – The Indians Seemed to be determined to take it. <sup>4</sup> And I became doubtful whether I could, if unsupported, hold it or not. I therefore dispatched a messenger to Col. Perry, informing him that unless he Sent to me a Gattling gun I would abandon the position. The gun however, was Sent, a few revolutions of which dispersed the Indians, and ended the battle.

On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> about 11 o clock, we discovered coming from the direction of Mt Idaho, two mounted men, Some three or four miles distant from our position at Cottonwood, at the Same time Seeing Some distance in their rear, objects, which we were unable at the time to determine to be mounted men or loose Stock. Coincident with seeing the two men and the

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<sup>2</sup> Both Whipple and Perry held the rank of captain at the time. The "colonel" indicates their brevet rank.

<sup>3</sup> Perry had about twenty men with his supply train. The combined commands then totaled about ninety soldiers plus civilian scouts and volunteers.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Nez Perces, these desultory attacks were planned to pin the soldiers to their entrenchments and thus avoid any possibility of Perry's attacking the Nez Perce column on the open prairie.

objects in the rear, we Saw the Indians<sup>5</sup> leaving their position on our right – for the purpose, as we supposed, of intercepting and cutting off the two men advancing on the Mt Idaho road three or four miles from the position occupied by the Indians. In this movement the Indians passed directly across our front about one and a half miles from us. The distance from the Indians to the two men, when first discovered was, as nearly as I can judge about the Same as that of the two men from Col. Perry’s position at Cottonwood. Upon Seeing the approach of these two men, and the efforts of the Indians to cut them off, Col Perry ordered Some of his Command to be mounted, but before the order could be executed the two men came in closely followed by the Indians. This exciting chase diverted the attention of all parties from the objects which were at first observed in the rear of the two men, and who were at first Supposed to be loose Stock. I, on the Safe arrival of the two within our lines, left the bluff which overlooked the whole Scene, and went down to the house to learn from whence the two men came and what news they brought – After being a very few minutes off the bluff, I heard a few Shots, to which I paid little attention as we had, during the morning been firing at intervals at an Indian who came within range of our guns: the firing however, in a few moments rapidly increased when I again mounted my horse and Started for the hill, in ascending which I met Col. Perry coming down: he Said to me, that those men we Saw are Some of your people from Mt Idaho,<sup>6</sup> if I had my command mounted I might have saved them, but it is now too late, as they are already Surrounded: He further Said I can no longer look at it, it makes my heart Sick – and went off the hill; while I went on to the top of the bluff, when I at once Saw that they were indeed Surrounded, about one mile and a half from the position we occupied. I remained with many others looking at the bloody work for Some time, (probably fifteen or twenty minutes) when the firing gradually decreased, when I remarked that the poor fellows were all killed – We Soon however, discovered Some two or three men approaching us, who proved to be white men<sup>7</sup> and part of Capt. Randalls party – Again a lively firing was resumed, which convinced me that Some of our men were Still alive and defending themselves. I remarked that it was a Shame and an outrage to allow those men to remain there and perish without an effort being made to Same them. I then mounted my horse and dashed toward them as fast as he would carry me, reaching them I think in less than five minutes, having my horse Shot entirely through the body just as I reached the men. About the Same time that I left the hill to join my friends, I Saw Capt. Whipple Start with a line of foot men, deployed as Skirmishers to their assistance also. After remaining about fifteen or twenty minutes with Randalls men, the firing again almost wholly ceased, growing impatient at the tardiness of the line under Capt. Whipple reaching us, I remounted my horse

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<sup>5</sup> According to Yellow Wolf and others, these were young scouts who had not yet earned their warrior rank. The main Nez Perce fighting force was escorting the families and stock on their march.

<sup>6</sup> Captain D. B. Randall and sixteen other volunteers from Mount Idaho. They fought with the young Indian scouts for about four hours – from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Randall and Ben Evans were killed. The Indians lost Weescultat, an older man in charge of the young scouts. For details on the skirmish see the two books by L. V. McWhorter, *Yellow Wolf: His Own Story* (Caldwell: Caxton, 1940), 75-83: and *Hear Me, My Chiefs!* (Caldwell: Caxton, 1952), 287-293.

<sup>7</sup> Eph. Bruncker and Jim Buchanan

and returned to him who was Still Some five or Six hundred yards in our rear and halted – on reaching them I Saw Lieutenant Shelton who had joined Capt. Whipple with Some mounted men, and asked him why they did not move on to our relief and enable us to get our wounded from the field. He became a little furious and asked why I talked to him, as he was not in command of the line: Whereupon Capt. Whipple inquired why we did not bring off the wounded, when I repeated to him what I Said to Lt. Shelton. He replied that he could not move any further as his right was threatened; where upon one of the men in the ranks Said loudly and distinctly, ‘Shearer, you need not come to the 1st calvary for assistance, as you will not get any.’ This remark was made as a rebuke to his officer, as I understood it, for Some of the men actually advanced from their line to come to our relief and were prematurely ordered back. I then asked for Someone to be at once Sent for a wagon and returned to the men, who were Still keeping up a desultory fire upon the fast retreating Indians. Matters remained in this position until we had taken our wounded from the field,<sup>8</sup> and the Indians after having Secured considerable time for their Stock to get out of reach had all gone, when Capt. Whipple advanced his line over the ground on which the fighting had occurred.

Very Respectfully  
GEO. M. SHEARER

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<sup>8</sup> By now it is after 4 p.m., and the Nez Perces have left