

As spring approaches the 4rd annual Nez Perce Ride to Freedom sponsored by the Appaloosa Horse Club of Canada nears its date in June 2008. This ride in Cypress Hills cannot be described without understanding the history around 1877 and that what occurred was one of the most detailed documented epic endurance rides ever achieved by man and horse.

The journey of the Nez Perce non-treaty tribes on their appaloosa horses covered 1300 miles from the mountainous canyons and valleys of north eastern Oregon, central Idaho, across countless rivers including the Snake and Salmon to Montana and Wyoming then north to cross the harrowing jagged, rocky terrain of the Bitterroot mountains which is one the most daunting hikes on horseback. This was done in approximately three and half months by 1200 Nez Perce men, women with children, grandparents; of that group only 250 were experienced warriors all while being pursued from one battle site to the next by trained soldiers of the U.S Calvary and Infantry. Eventually the Nez Perce were cornered , out-numbered and out-gunned by three companies of the 2nd Calvary and three divisions the 3th, 5th Calvary and 7th U.S Infantry (comprising each of approximately 150-200 young men) on the plains of Bear's Paw hills 40 miles from Nez Perce's hope of freedom – Canada.

The incredible journey is a climax of a freedom fight that spans 50 years of conflict between the Nez Perce and the U.S government. It involves a fight over rich lands for grazing, farming and of course to find gold. But it is also a horse story for above all the Nez Perce were a highly acclaimed horse culture for their horses carried them across their huge homeland known as the Columbia Plateau of Northeastern Oregon, central Idaho and southeastern Washington to hunt deer, elk, fish salmon and gather roots such as the camas; thus their tribe covered an area of approximately eleven thousand square miles. The Niimipuu roamed at liberty the pristine landscape and followed ancestral hunting trails for centuries prior to their meeting with Lewis and Clark around 1805. Strategically they lived along the main north-south Indian trade routes of the rockies and acquired the Spanish horses that spread Northward or as by their oral tradition tells by the Russian fur trading ships. The Niimipuu prized the spotted coat pattern of the horse and became selective breeders for a horse for their purposes: hunting game in the mountainous terrain and timber of Oregon, a supreme trail horse- surefooted to stitch down steep valleys, the stamina to carry loads and rider over hills and for the warriors a horse to cross the Bitterroot's into Montana to hunt Buffalo; a horse as colorful as their culture. This was the glory days of the breed we now know as the appaloosa, as the Nez Perce in centuries of isolation grew a strong horse from the rich hidden meadows of the mountains and gentled enough for the young to catch. They also were one of the only first nation people to practice gelding of animals so that only the finest stallions covered their free-ranging mares. Lewis and Clark were impressed with the Nez Perce peaceful existence and valued them as receiving “true hospitality” from them and of their horses Lewis wrote:

“Their horses appear to be of an excellent race; they are lofty elegantly formed active and durable; in short many of them look like the fine English coarsers and would make a figure in any country. Some of the horses are pided,[pied] with large spots of white irregularly scattered and intermixed with the black brown bey [bay] or some other dark color, but much the larger portion are of an uniform color with stars,snips and white feet, or in this respect marked much like our best blooded horses in Virginia,which they resemble as well in fleetness and bottom as in form and colors.”

However, the Nez Perce idyllic life was to come to an end with the steady influx of white settlers and miners onto their lands. The treaty of 1855 honored by the many Nez Perce chiefs gave them a reservation of approximately 5,000 squares miles but government promises of a school, doctors, and provisions were not kept. The following treaty of 1863 cut the reservation to 1 tenth is size because of the discovery of gold which was coveted by the government and the resulting disputes officiated by the U.S sided on white settlers rights and clearly were biased to gain lands. The spring of 1877 saw meetings between the chiefs of the Nez Perce and appointed Brigadier General Howard pressured by

U.S to give the verdict: go to selected reservations or be forced by the military onto these lands. The command angered the now frustrated Nez Perce who had suffered numerous indignities from the whites; overrunning their lands, shooting their horses, shortchanging and cheating them in trades, and to murder. Eagle Robe from White Bird's band had been killed by a squatter who built his fence across the Nez Perce's garden, Eye-a-ma-Koot was hacked to death with a pick by a miner who was upset that their dogs had gotten into a fight, and whites beat natives with bull whips if they approached too close to homesteads. Now the ultimatum to the Chiefs in which they had 30 days to gather belongings and report to reservations; a heartless and impossible task given that the bands' cattle and horses numbering in the thousands wandered the hills and valleys of the winter pastures with trails still covered in snow and where rivers were now fiercely swollen. Hence, a number of non-treaty Nez Perce broke free of talks, young warriors sought revenge, and the war of 1877 began.

The war involved several chiefs, the most well known being young Chief Joseph, Looking Glass, White Bird, Big Thunder, Eagle from the Light, Toohoolhoolzote (Sound), and Peopeo Tholekt (Bird Alighting). They remained committed to their traditional way of life. The first battle started on June 15, 1877 at Cottonwood, following battles were at White Bird Canyon, Clearwater, Weippe, Fort. Fizzle, Big Hole, Camas Meadow, Canyon Creek, Cow Creek Canyon, and lastly after a 5 day battle with Joseph's people near starvation, freezing and the tribes in disarray, and split off from each other Chief Joseph surrendered at Bear's Paw. Remarkable, throughout the hounding chase and battles the Nez Perce had been winning against division after division the U.S government sent against them, largely to their "almost scientific skill, using advance and rear guards, skirmish lines, and field fortifications," reported William Sherman the commanding General of the U.S Armies. The Nez Perce made headlines with the public newspapers of the times, which herald the warriors bravery, precision shooting, and incidents such as the Nez Perce surprise and victory over Howard's larger calvary force and capture of his train at Camas Meadow. Diary entries by foot soldiers, calvary men, to the Generals describe the Nez Perce rhythmical and fluid riding ability, strategic organization in battle and that their horses were extremely "gentled" and remained "tied" to warriors in the thickest of shooting. In contrast the U.S Calvary lacked horsemanship and rider skills from the freshly recruited boys many of whom did not even know how to ride. Their horses crossed rivers which the Calvary horses would not, and kept a pace always ahead of General's Howard forces.

A broken and exhausted people cross the Canadian border in Oct, 1877; White Bird led a group of 120 to Sitting Bull's camp in Wood Buffalo, others not so fortunate were separated from their families and tribes and desperately crossed into Canada. The records state between 160-250 Nez Perce found their freedom. 418 were captured with Chief Joseph at Bear's Paw with many loses on both sides. The months following saw another 150 Nez Perce die of malaria at Fort. Leavenworth, Kansas and in Missouri where they were detained while waiting to trek to the reservations in Oregon and Washington. General Terry followed after the Nez Perce and on October 17, 1877 called council at Fort Walsh with Sitting Bull, the Nez Perce and Superintendent James Morrow Walsh to order the Sioux back to the United States. The presence of the Sioux and Nez Perce in Canada made the U.S and Canadian governments extremely nervous of impending and unrivaled unified native war.

The Appaloosa Horse Club's ride down at Cypress Hills remembers the trail past Bear's Paw and the costly journey to freedom that they would not be able to receive. The devastation of 1877 was on a culture and a horse breed that nearly went extinct for the military feared this war horse and immediately killed at least 400, mainly stallions, and auctioned the remainder under a program of crossbreeding to drafts. With increasingly generations and high standards of breeders the Appaloosa' fine traits are reborn in Canadian and American horses. The ApHcc' ride has connected with the Nez Perce Appaloosa Horse Club whom has speakers, and educators willing to share their unique viewpoint about the story from the past to the present. June 28,29,30 of 2008 will see another ride at Cypress Hills to commemorate this inspiring true tale of a desperate flight to freedom against insurmountable

odds. It matters little now of what they didn't achieve, but what they did accomplish is more the remarkable. Proud to be spotted on this trail. Gail Praharenka. Rider Coordinator Trail and Recreation

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