

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

JOSEPH (TUEKAKAS): CHIEF OF THE NEZ PERCE 1785—1871



This portrait of Joseph was painted by Gustav Sohon on May 29, 1855. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

American history first records Tuekakas, principal chief of the Wallowa band of Nez Perce, in 1834, when he welcomed Captain Benjamin Bonneville as he led the first white men into the Wallowa Valley.

Tuekakas, father to the now more widely known Chief Joseph, was in his late forties at that time, and he accepted and greeted the travelers as representatives of a friendly and honorable people. The Nez Perce treated the Bonneville party to a feast of deer, elk, and buffalo meat, served along with fish and roots, before they settled in for a long talk. Tuekakas was eager for news of the United States, and Bonneville described and promoted the merits of the American nation.

Christians Come to Lapwai

When the missionaries Marcus Whitman and Henry Spalding arrived in Lapwai in 1836, they were intent on converting the Indians to Christianity. Tuekakas was drawn to the new religion, and moved to distant Lapwai for long periods of time for instruction. In 1839 Tuekakas and another Nez Perce headman, Timothy were the first Nez Perce to convert to Christianity. Following his conversion,

Tuekakas (now Joseph) and his wife, Khapkhaponimi (who came to be called Asenoth) married again in their new faith in Spalding's church. Their children were also baptized, and given Christian names, including a boy, Ephraim, who was likely the future Chief Joseph of Nez Perce War fame.

Following the Whitman massacre, the influence of the missions was broken, and Joseph returned to Wallowa Valley. By some accounts he then reverted to his native beliefs, but others describe him as a practicing Christian and friend of the whites for at least another fifteen years.

The Whitman Massacre:

This is the term most frequently used in historical records to describe the 1847 attack on the mission at Lapwai that ended in the murder of thirteen people, including Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. Tribes participating at the time considered it retribution for the epidemic of measles in the area and for the Whitmans' housing and perceived preferential treatment of settlers on the Oregon trail.

Treaty Councils

At the Walla Walla Council of 1855, Joseph remained largely quiet, saying only, "I have a good heart, what the (Chief) Lawyer says, let it be." When the call for signatures came, Joseph signed along with the other chiefs. But in the years that followed, he refused to accept treaty payments, insisting that he had given nothing at Walla Walla and expected nothing in return.

At the Lapwai Council in 1863, Joseph refused to sign the treaty drawn up since by that time, the reservation had been so reduced in size that his homelands were now outside its borders. From that point on, Joseph became a leader of the "non-treaty" Nez Perce. He erected boundary monuments to mark his land, and destroyed the Bible given to him by Spalding many years earlier. With this symbolic gesture, Joseph turned his back on the American government he considered dishonest.

By 1869, Joseph had gone blind, although he continued to instruct his sons with regard to his perceptions of white men, treaties, and Mother Earth. He told them:

When you go into council with a white man, always remember your country. Do not give it away. The white man will cheat you out of your home.

In August of 1871, old Joseph told his son while on his deathbed:

When I am gone, think of your country. You are the chief of these people. They look to you to guide them. Always remember that your father never sold the country. You must stop your ears whenever you are asked to sign a treaty selling your home. A few years more, and the white man will be all around you. They have their eyes on this land. My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother.

He died in a camp at the fork of the Wallowa and Lostine rivers, in the land that had been so important to his people. His son later said of that camp: "I buried him in that beautiful valley of winding waters. I love that land more than the rest of all the world. A man who would not love his father's grave is worse than a wild animal."

Nez Perce War

By 1877, the federal government had tried to force the "non-treaty" bands, including the Wallowa Nez Perce, now led by young Chief Joseph, out of their homelands and onto the



The map above shows three areas involved in the Walla Walla Treaties: Walla Walla (1), the Wallowa Valley (2) and the Lapwai Valley (3). Courtesy Washington Historical Society.



This portrait features young Joseph, the old chief's son, and his family ca. 1877. After their surrender at the end of the Nez Perce war, the family was taken to Kansas. Despite promises made to return them to the Pacific Northwest, they would not return to their homelands until 1885. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

more restricted reservation. The Indians' response was the Nez Perce War.

"For decades," wrote Robert Ignatius Burns, "the Nez Perce were considered as tame Indians, underrated and even mis-treated despite their unswerving friendship for the Whites. They won fame and respect only when they went to war."

Although young Chief Joseph's brilliance as a war chief won sympathy from the American public, when defeat came to the defiant Nez Perce, they were nevertheless sent into exile at the Colville and Lapwai agencies.

Sources:

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