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Chief Looking Glass, an experienced warrior familiar with the buffalo country of Montana, was chosen to lead the Nez Perce at the start of their flight. He was later killed at the Battle of the Bear's Paw.

In the summer of 1877 five bands of Nez Perce Indians consisting of 800 people, including 250 warriors, began a 1,170-mile journey from northeastern Oregon and central Idaho over the Bitterroot Mountains and through the Montana Territory. Though they were herding more than 2,000 horses and carrying whatever possessions they could manage, the Nez Perce made this long and difficult trek in less than four months. United States Army troops under Gen. Oliver O. Howard had orders to place the five non-treaty bands of Nez Perce on a small reservation in central Idaho. The Nez Perce had hoped to elude the soldiers, but they were forced to stop and face their pursuers several times. The battle with the highest number of casualties during this epic odyssey took place in the Big Hole Valley of southwestern Montana. The Battle of the Big Hole was a tragic turning point of what came to be called the Nez Perce War of 1877.

The Nez Perce arrived in the lush Big Hole Valley on the morning of August 7, and their trail leader, Chief Looking Glass, chose an old camp site at which to set up their tents. Believing that they were far enough ahead of Howard's soldiers to be

out of danger, Looking Glass did not post guards. Unknown to the Nez Perce, a second military force—162 men of the 7th U.S. Infantry out of Fort Shaw and four other western Montana forts under the command of Col. John Gibbon—had joined the chase and was advancing toward them.

Gibbon's scouts spotted the Nez Perce tips on the afternoon of August 8. Before dawn on the 9th most of the soldiers and 34 civilian volunteers were forming a skirmish line behind a screen of willow brush along the west bank of the North Fork of the Big Hole River, within 200 yards of the Nez Perce camp. Here they waited tensely for first light to attack. The attack started prematurely, however, when a Nez Perce named Natalekin went out to check his horses and stumbled onto the concealed soldiers and volunteers, who shot and killed him. When the troops crossed the river and fired into the village, some of the Nez Perce scattered quickly while others were slow to awaken. In the confusion of the faint pre-dawn light, men,



Col. John Gibbon, a decorated Civil War veteran and commander of the 7th U.S. Infantry, suffered a leg wound in the battle. He applauded the Nez Perce's stand at the Big Hole, calling it "a gallant struggle."

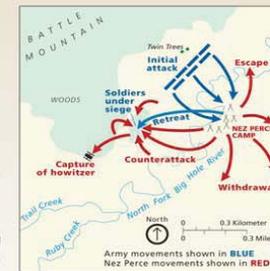
women, and children were shot indiscriminately. The soldiers soon occupied the upper end of the camp, while the Nez Perce warriors, urged on by chiefs Looking Glass and White Bird, quickly took defensive positions and prepared a counterattack. Their deadly shooting eventually forced Gibbon's men to retreat back across the river to a point of pines projecting from Battle Mountain. In the timber the troops dug in for a siege and were pinned down for the next 24 hours.

During the attack, some of Gibbon's men had been struggling to haul a 12-pound mountain howitzer through the dense lodge-pole pine forest. They managed to place it on the hillside above the soldiers were digging in. The crew fired two rounds before a group of Nez Perce horsemen, galloping forward, captured the gun, dismantled it, and scattered its parts.

As the siege continued, some of the Nez Perce warriors began withdrawing to help Chief Joseph and others to care for the injured, bury the dead, gather their horses, and break camp. Others remained to keep the soldiers under fire while the Nez Perce families headed south, leaving much of their belongings and many of their dead behind. Finally, on August 10, in the early morning of the second day of fighting, the remaining warriors fired parting shots and left to join their people. The battle was over.

General Howard's troops arrived the next day and found Colonel Gibbon wounded and his command out of action. In a military sense the Nez Perce had won the battle, but the "victory" was a hollow one. Sixty to ninety members of the tribe had been killed. Only about thirty of these were warriors; the rest were women, children, and old people. The Nez Perce now realized the war was not over and they must flee for their lives.

The military's losses were also high, with 29 dead and 40 wounded, but the soldiers knew that they had greatly damaged the fighting ability and the morale of the Nez Perce people. Despite the tragic events that occurred on the battlefield, both sides demonstrated acts of heroism and human kindness. Seven enlisted men were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, and those officers who survived received brevet promotions. For many of the soldiers and volunteers the horrors of what they had seen at the Battle of the Big Hole would haunt them for the rest of their lives.



This Model 1873 Rice trowel bayonet was discovered on the battlefield during archeological investigations in 1991. It was an experimental device designed to serve also as a hatchet and entrenching tool, which is how it was used at the Battle of the Big Hole. Colonel Gibbon later claimed that "if it hadn't been for them none of us... would have lived to tell the tale."

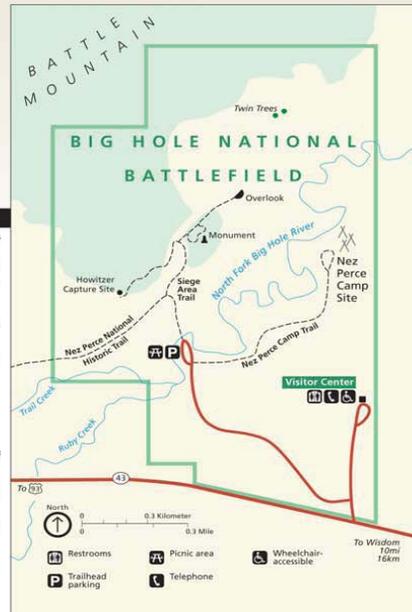


Above left: This colorful coat, given to 2d Lt. Lowell Jerome by Chief Joseph, is said to be one of the jackets worn by Chief Joseph at the Battle of the Bear's Paw. Above right: Army fatigue blouses of this 1872 pattern are believed to have been worn by some of the enlisted men of the 7th Infantry during the Battle of the Big Hole.

This buffalo drinking horn belonged to Wounded Head (*Husis Oyween*), a Nez Perce warrior who derived his name from the wound he received in the battle. Wounded Head carved a notch in the horn for each Nez Perce he found dead at the Big Hole. His figures were 10 women, 21 children, and 32 men for a total of 63.



T. C. Sherrill was one of the 34 civilian volunteers from the Bitterroot Valley who fought in the Battle of the Big Hole. He became the first caretaker of Big Hole battlefield, under the U.S. Forest Service, serving from 1914 through 1916.



Big Hole National Battlefield Today

Big Hole National Battlefield memorializes the Nez Perce men, women, and children, the soldiers of the 7th U.S. Infantry, and the Bitterroot Volunteers who clashed at the Battle of the Big Hole.

Stop first at the visitor center, which overlooks the battlefield. A 26-minute video program and a museum of photographs, quotations, and personal items belonging to some of the battle participants provide orientation to the park and its story. There is also a sales and information desk.

The visitor center is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours in the summer. It is closed January 1, Thanksgiving, and December 25.

Trails begin at the lower parking lot and lead to several points of interest:

Nez Perce Camp The battle began here when soldiers surprised the sleeping Nez Perce. Like other tribal places in Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, this area is Sacred Ground. It symbolizes the strength and spirit of the Nez Perce, and serves as a reminder of their heavy losses in their struggle for freedom. A guide booklet to the Nez Perce Camp is available along the trail.

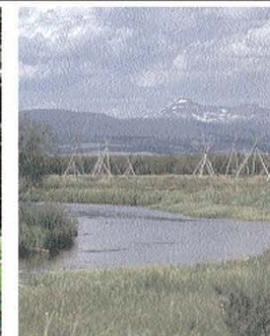
Siege Area The soldiers were besieged here for nearly 24 hours. The trenches they dug still remain. They remind us of the desperate struggle the soldiers waged here to survive and of the Nez Perce efforts to pin down the soldiers while their families escaped. A guide booklet to the Siege Area is available along the trail.

Howitzer Capture Site The steep walk up to the site where Nez Perce warriors captured Gibbon's howitzer takes about 20 minutes and provides a spectacular view of the battlefield and the Big Hole Valley.

A Word of Caution Coyote, deer, elk, moose, and other animals native to the park are harmless at a distance, but can be dangerous if startled or approached too closely. Always keep a safe distance. Pets are not allowed on trails or in the visitor center, and must be under physical control at all times. The park is open to cross-country skiing, but be prepared for severe winter weather conditions.



Howitzer capture site.



Site of Nez Perce Camp.

About Your Visit

Big Hole National Battlefield is 10 miles west of Wisdom, Mont., on Mont. 43. From Butte, Mont., take I-15 south-west to Divide, then to Wisdom on Mont. 43; from the west, Mont. 43 intersects U.S. 93 at the State line between Salmon, Idaho, and Hamilton, Mont. From Dillon, take I-15 south three miles to the Wisdom exit, then to Wisdom on Highway 278, then west on Mont. 43.

There are picnic tables at the lower parking lot. Camping and overnight facilities are available in nearby campgrounds.

Fishing is permitted in the national battlefield and the adjacent national forest as provided by Montana law. No hunting is allowed within

the national battlefield. Montana laws apply in the national forest.

Mounting and fishing on private land is by permission only. Fuel, food, and lodging—although limited—can be found in nearby Wisdom. More complete services are available in Butte or Dillon, Mont., to the east, and Hamilton, Mont., or Salmon, Idaho, to the west.

For More Information
Big Hole National Battlefield
P.O. Box 237
Wisdom, MT 59761
406-689-3155
www.nps.gov/biho

Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about other parks in the National Park System.