

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Chief Joseph Battleground of the Bear's Paw

and or common Bearpaw Mountain Fight (Snake Creek Fight)

2. Location

street & number T 30N R 19E, Section 1 (S½ of the SW¼ and the SW¼ of the SE¼)
and Section 12 (NW¼ and the W½ of the NE¼) not for publication

city, town About 14 miles vicinity of south of Chinook

state Montana code 25 county Blaine code 005

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Ron Hyypa Administrator
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

street & number 1420 East 6th Avenue

city, town Helena vicinity of state Montana 59620

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Blaine County Courthouse

street & number

city, town Chinook state Montana

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title National Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date October 6, 1970 federal state county local

depository for survey records National Park Service Interagency Resources Division

city, town Washington state DC

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved

date October 17, 1986

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Site Today

Few, if any, American battlegrounds, possess the pristine integrity of Montana's Bear Paw Mountain Battlefield. The rolling grass-covered hills to the east and west of Snake Creek, which flowing north and then east bisects the site, and the steep sloped coulees converging on the stream have not changed in the 110 years since the battle and siege that ended the Nez Perces' epic 1700-mile march.

The Snake Creek bottom, bounding the crystal clear stream, is grown up in willows, and here are found beavers and their dams. On the skyline, seven miles to the south, are the rugged buttes that constitute the Bearpaw Mountains. Miles, McCann, and Iron Buttes are grass covered, while Timber Butte, raising to a height of 5,446 feet, is timbered.

The tall grasses by early autumn have long matured. Looking southward from Red Rock School, one mile north of the battleground, toward the mountains you are struck by the area's timeliness -- Brown grasslands seemingly roll away to the horizon like the waves of the ocean. Verily this is the Big Sky Country at its best.

Intrusions upon the historic scene, where the Nez Perce War climaxed, are minimal, and most of these are beyond the site's core-area. To the west is graveled State Secondary Highway 240 linking Chinook (13 miles to the north) with Cleveland (eight miles southeast and beyond). Barbed wire fences bound the road and define property lines; telephone poles and wire parallel highway 240; the Snake Creek bottoms north and south of the battleground are seeded in hay and alfalfa; there is a corral to the west of highway 240; several unobtrusive ranch buildings are visible in the Snake Creek bottom southwest of the site; and there are the sparse visitor amenities constructed west of Snake Creek by the State of Montana Fish and Game Commission, Recreations and Parks Division.

Of these low key intrusions, the only ones located within the proposed National Historic Landmarks are: State Secondary Highway 240, several fences, the telephone line, and the visitor support and interpretive facilities. The latter consist of a short access road and two traffic islands. Located on the first circle are parking spaces and three interpretive waysides, the latter secured to weathered rocks. For the comfort of visitors enjoying the wayside interpretive markers, there are benches and wind screens. Adjacent to the second traffic island is a small day use area with a well, double latrine, and shelter. On the access road are found two signs--an orientation and an entry.

A trail, crossing Snake Creek on two pedestrian bridges, provides visitor access to the more significant sites associated with the nationally significant events that took place here more than 110 years ago.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates Sept. 30–Oct. 5, 1877 **Builder/Architect**

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Bear Paw Mountain fight and siege that ended on October 5, 1877, with the surrender of Chief Joseph and more than 400 of his people is judged to be nationally significant in the history of the United States under criteria 1, places "that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent, the broad patterns of United States history and from which an understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained"; and 2 places "that are associated importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States."

The fight that began September 30, 1877, with the all out mounted charge by the 7th Cavalry ended on October 5 in heartbreak and sorrow the epic trek of the Nez Perces. Robert M. Utley writing in Frontier Regulars, in a few well chosen words, gives an excellent perspective to the tragic events that were played out on the stark and beautiful rolling grasslands in the shadow of the Bear Paw Mountains:

In three months approximately 800 people--men, women, and children--traveled 1,700 miles across some of the most difficult terrain in North America. They outmarched, outwitted, and outfought all that the U.S. Army could throw against them. They left about 120 of their people dead on the trail, almost half of them women and children. They killed about 180 white men, mostly soldiers, and wounded another 150. Their just cause, their unity of purpose and action, their seemingly bottomless reservoirs of courage, endurance, and tenacity, their sheer achievement and final heartbreaking failure when on the very threshold of success, have evoked sympathy and admiration for a century.¹

The Bear Paw surrender, signaled more than the end of the long flight from Idaho and Oregon. It marked the close of the Nez Perces' existence as an "independent Indian people." Henceforth, they lived as a group of displaced persons, in the white culture but certainly not of it. In a real sense, the Nez Perce Nation was no more.

General of the Army William T. Sherman, in summarizing the Nez Perce War, recognized the "humanity and military proficiency" displayed by the Indians and their leaders. In his report to the Secretary of War, Sherman wrote:

Thus has terminated one of the most extraordinary Indian wars of which there is any record. The Indians throughout displayed a courage and skill that elicited universal praise. They abstained from scalping; let captive women go free; did not commit indiscriminate murder of peaceful families which is unusual and fought with almost scientific skill, using advance and rear guards, skirmish-lines, and field fortifications. Nevertheless, they would not settle down on lands set apart for them, ample for their maintenance; and, when commanded by proper authority, they began resistance by murdering persons in no manner connected with their alleged grievances.²

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET 9-1

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 360
Quadrangle name Cleveland SW and Cleveland NW

Quadrangle scale 1-24000

UTM References

A	<u>1</u> <u>2</u>	<u>6</u> <u>3</u> <u>3</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>0</u>	<u>5</u> <u>3</u> <u>6</u> <u>0</u> <u>1</u> <u>9</u> <u>0</u>	B	<u>1</u> <u>2</u>	<u>6</u> <u>3</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>0</u> <u>0</u>	<u>5</u> <u>3</u> <u>5</u> <u>9</u> <u>0</u> <u>0</u> <u>0</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C	<u>1</u> <u>2</u>	<u>6</u> <u>3</u> <u>2</u> <u>1</u> <u>6</u> <u>0</u>	<u>5</u> <u>3</u> <u>5</u> <u>9</u> <u>0</u> <u>0</u> <u>0</u>	D	<u>1</u> <u>2</u>	<u>6</u> <u>3</u> <u>2</u> <u>1</u> <u>4</u> <u>0</u>	<u>5</u> <u>3</u> <u>6</u> <u>0</u> <u>1</u> <u>9</u> <u>0</u>
E				F			
G				H			

Verbal boundary description and justification

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET 10-1

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Edwin C. Bearss, Chief Historian

organization History Division
National Park Service

date February 18, 1988

street & number P.O. Box 37127

telephone (202) 343-8163

city or town Washington

state DC 20013-7127

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title _____ date _____

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date _____

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date _____

Chief of Registration

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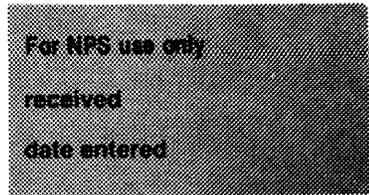
S Bar B Ranch
c/o Mrs. Vonnie Davies
P.O. Box 699
Chinook, MT 59523

Gordon Cattle Co.
c/o Henry Gordon
Chinook, MT 59523

Richard G. & Monica P. Conrad
Route 70, Box 49
Chinook, MT 59523

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Marking the Battlefield -- Site Identification and Memorialization

In August 1935, L. V. McWhorter, Chief Many Wounds, and Chief White Hawk visited the battle site and identified, staked, and mapped the area. Chiefs Many Wounds and White Hawk were veterans of the battle, siege, and the surrender. The results of their efforts were compiled and entered on a map surveyed by C. R. Noyes and titled "Battle of the Bear's Paw Between General Miles and Chief Joesph, Sept. 30 to Oct. 5 -- 1877, Scale 1" = 100'," with a contour interval of five feet. The Noyes Map was copyrighted January 10, 1936.

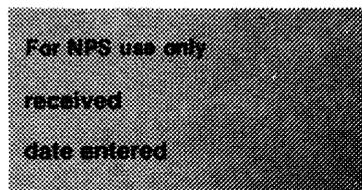
Although I have visited all major Civil War battle sites in public ownership and many of those in private ownership, I have never walked or expect to tread a battlefield where site identification is as comprehensive. Located on the battlefield are 139 numbered metal pins keyed to the Noyes Map. These numbered pins identify lodge sites, Indian shelter pits, rifle-pits, sites where soldiers and Indians were killed or wounded, initial burial sites, bullet-scarred boulders, etc.

For example, under entry 9, "Where the Seventh Cavalry was Rolled Back" are found these pins and stations, as keyed to the Noyes Map:

<u>Station</u>	<u>Course</u>	<u>Distance from Transit Station</u>	<u>Stake No.</u>	
No. 3	S34°30'E	357'	118	Wo-to-len, fought here
No. 3	S34°38'E	342'	119	Young Soo-Koups killed also one soldier killed, and one wounded
No. 3	S35°18'E	331'	120	Young Akh-tai-la-ken, fought
No. 3	S36°11'E	316'	121	Lone Bird, fought
No. 3	S33°20'E	309'	123	Many Coyotes, fought
No. 3	S77°52'E	194'	127	Soldier rifle-pit (Indians retired)
No. 3	S79°20'E	188'	125	Soldier rifle-pit (Indians retired)
No. 3	S89°63'E	180'	126	Unknown warrior, behind boulder
No. 3	N81°10'E	245'	127	Soldier-dog rifle-pit (Indian retired)
No. 4	N 4°06'W	272'	128	Buffalo-wallow, Soo-koups, died
No. 3	N75°50'E	282'	129	Unknown warrior, fought behind boulder
No. 3	N72°47'E	255'	130	Shooting Thunder, fought behind boulder
No. 3	N68°34'E	262'	131	Boulder circle, Nez Perce defense
No. 3	N63°46'E	244'	132	Unknown warrior fought

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<u>Station</u>	<u>Course</u>	<u>Distance from Transit Station</u>	<u>Stake No.</u>	
No. 5	S39°07'E	190'	133	Rainbow Jr., wounded
No. 5	S39°07'E	135'	134	Lone Bird, Rainbow Sr., and Kei-ih-kown killed and left unburied
No. 5	S49°43'W	59'	135	Reg Legs and soldiers lay dead
No. 3	S24°32'W	350'	138	*Mass grave of 22 soldiers
No. 18	S 3°45'W	430'	139	Chief Joseph surrender site

*The soldiers' bodies were initially disinterred and reburied at Fort Assiniboine and then in 1913 they were moved to Custer Battlefield National Cemetery.

On the knoll 200 yards east of Snake Creek, overlooking the site where Chief Joseph surrendered to Colonel Miles, at an elevation of 3010 feet, are two monuments. The first of these is the monument erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Chinook Lions Club and dedicated September 30, 1929. The text reads:

BEAR'S PAW BATTLEGROUND

In Greatful remembrence of the officers and enlisted men killed in action in the last decisive erved conflict between the white men and red men in the Northwest.

September 30-October 5, 1877

7th U. S. Cavalry
18 names

2nd U. S. Cavalry
1 name

5th U. S. Infantry
4 names

Erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution

and

The Citizens of Blaine County, Montana

September 30, 1929

BEAR'S PAW BATTLEGROUND

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Nearby is the monument erected in accordance with the April 15, 1930, act of Congress. The inscription reads:

Commeorating the surrender of Chief Joseph and the remnants of his tribe of Nez Perce to General Nelson A. Miles, October 5, 1877. Here Chief Looking Glass, Ollicut, Too-Hul-Hul-Sote, and many other warriors were killed.

Chief Joseph was a military genius, courageous and humane.

Presenting his rifle to General Miles, with right hand upraised, he proclaimed, "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."

He kept his word.

A third battlefield monument is sited on high ground 200 yards east of Snake Creek and 100 feet south of the line separating Section 1 and 12. This shaft and Indian head monument was positioned here in 1928 to identify the site where Chief Looking Glass was killed on October 5, 1877.

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And as Col. Nelson A. Miles added:

The Nez Perces are the boldest men and best marksmen of any Indians I have ever encountered, and Chief Joseph is a man of more sagacity and intelligence than any Indian I have ever met; he counseled against the war, and against the usual cruelties practiced by the Indians, and is far more humane than such Indians as Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull.³

These words of Colonel Miles, along with written accounts by Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard and other participants, contributed to creating a picture of Chief Joseph as a "red Napoleon." But, as western historian Utley has written:

In appraisals like this by the men who fought the Nez Perces may be glimpsed the origins of a Chief Joseph legend that, despite the recent works of Alvin Josephy, Mark Brown, and Merrill Beal, continues to dominate the literature of the Nez Perce War. As chief of the Wallowa band and spokesman for the nontreaty Nez Perces, Joseph early emerged in the public view as the leader of the non-treaty Nez Perces. Later, when the fugitives repeatedly evaded and fought off their military pursuers, the officers thus humiliated ... portrayed Joseph as a strategic and tactical genius, a "red Napoleon." This image made their own failure more plausible, to themselves as well as the public. Howard was the main author of the legend, his prolific pen producing books and articles alike for more than a quarter of a century. Miles contributed, too, for the "red Napoleon" thesis enhanced his victory at Bear Paw. The death or escape of the other chiefs, Joseph's powerful and widely quoted surrender speech, and his long and highly conspicuous life after the war served to reinforce the legend.⁴

Joseph was more a political than a military leader, and among the Nez Perces, as among most Indian people, vital decisions were made by the chiefs in council. Among the Nez Perces there was a collective leadership that was shared by Joseph, Looking Glass, White Bird, Too-hool-hool-zote, Poker Joe, and others. Joseph did not assert his preeminence until the Bear Paw siege satisfied him that his people's situation was hopeless. For in the words of historian Utley, "Great and good man that he assuredly was Joseph was not the principal Nez Perce leader, still less a 'red Napoleon.'"⁵

Although Chief Joseph was not the great strategist and tactician that popular literature pictures, his role at the Bear Paw surrender and as an articulate and compelling spokesman for his people, before and after the war, assures his national significance.

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II. THE NARRATIVE

A. An Ambitious General Makes a Fast Start

Coincident with the crossing of the Yellowstone River by the Nez Perces and a U.S. cavalry column led by Col. Samuel D. Sturgis in mid-September, a courier rode eastward. He carried a message from Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard, then traveling with Sturgis' 7th Cavalry, addressed to Col. Nelson A. Miles. The communication told that the Nez Perces had outdistanced Sturgis following the Canyon Creek clash, stated that the Indians were now headed toward the Musselshell, and inquired into the possibility of Miles intercepting or overtaking them. Since early August, the energetic and ambitious Miles had kept himself informed about the "unfolding epic of the Nez Perces", hesitant to move against them because of uncertainty over the intentions of Sitting Bull" and the Sioux who had taken refuge in Canada. Howard's messenger reached Tongue River Cantonment (now Miles City) on the evening of September 17, and gave Miles the anxiously awaited call to action. By daybreak, the next morning, Miles had ferried five companies of the 5th U.S. Infantry and two troops of cavalry from the south bank to the north side of the Yellowstone.⁶

Miles' column headed northwest, and as it marched overtook and was reinforced by three troops of cavalry that had left Tongue River Cantonment some 24 hours earlier en route to meet and escort Maj. Gen. Alfred Terry to Canada for a meeting at Fort Walsh with Sitting Bull and the other Sioux leaders. Miles' command now included a four-company infantry battalion mounted on Indian ponies captured at the Muddy Creek fight, on May 7, led by Capt. Simon Snyder; a squadron of three troops of the 2d U.S. Cavalry commanded by Capt. George H. Tyler; a three-troop squadron from the 7th U.S. Cavalry under Capt. Owen Hale; some 30 Sioux and Cheyenne scouts; and the column's train--two strings of pack mules, 40 wagons, a 12-pdr. Napoleon, and a breech-loading Hotchkiss gun--guarded by a company of the 5th U.S. Infantry. Miles' task force was between 350 and 400 strong.⁷

Miles' column neared the Missouri, on the evening of September 23, some 60 miles downstream from Cow Island Landing, where the Nez Perces had crossed the Missouri earlier in the day. After attacking and plundering a wagon train, the Indians had ridden northward. While the warriors were looting the wagons, they were sighted by a company of Montana volunteers led by Maj. Guido Ilges that had struck eastward from Fort Benton. After an exchange of small arms fire, in which one of the volunteers was killed, Major Ilges recalled his people, rode back to Cow Island Landing, and sent scouts to find and apprise General Howard and Colonel Miles of the Nez Perces' whereabouts.⁸

B. Miles' Column Crosses the Missouri

That evening as his soldiers prepared to camp, Colonel Miles, knowing that he needed a steamboat to expedite his crossing of the Missouri, called for Lt. Jonathan W. Biddle. The lieutenant and a detachment were to ride either upstream or downstream in search of a steamboat. As Miles recalled, "I do not think that Lieutenant Biddle drew rein until he stood on the bank of the Missouri just in time to hail the last regular steamer going down the river that season, ... and when we reached the Missouri the next morning we found the steamer tied up at the bank awaiting us."⁹

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Miles, satisfied that the Indians were several days' ride south of the river, had Captain Tyler's battalion of the 2d Cavalry board the steamer and cross the river. Tyler's task "was to prevent the Nez Perces from crossing at any ferries above." Miles led the main column, followed by the wagons, upstream along the benches south of the Missouri. Since he had no further need for the steamboat, Colonel Miles dismissed Captain Baldwin and sent him on his way. Dame fortune smiled on the ambitious Miles and the army. As Miles was to write:

As our command was being prepared to march to the west, and while the steamer was but a short distance away, three men [Major Ilges' couriers] came down the river in a boat and announced the fact that the Nez Perces had crossed the Missouri some sixty miles to the west of us, at a point known as Cow Island....

The steamer was then beyond hailing distance, but quick as thought, Sergeant McHugh, whose piece of artillery was resting on the bank of the river, was ordered to charge his gun and train it down the river and commence throwing shot and shell as rapidly as possible. The reverberation of the cannon down between the high bluffs of the river, and the bursting of shells in the air on the left bank could be heard for several miles down the Missouri, and I knew that if these sounds reached the ears of that thorough soldier, Baldwin, he would turn back to the sound of the guns.

I was not mistaken in the man; in the course of twenty or thirty minutes the soldiers sung out: "Here she comes." And a most welcome sight it was, to see the black column of smoke as the steamer rounded the bend far below and came puffing up against the strong current.¹⁰

Again commandeering the steamer, Miles, on the 25th, shuttled Snyder's and Hale's battalions, the Sioux and Cheyenne scouts, the artillery, and trains across the Missouri. Thanks to the information provided by Major Ilges, Colonel Miles now knew that the Nez Perces were headed for Canada, and as he recalled:

The Little Rocky Mountains is a range some fifty miles in extent, running northwest and southeast Beyond the northern point about ten miles is a range known as the Bear's Paw Mountains, with a low divide connecting the two. My information was that the Nez Perces had taken the course that would bring them through this pass between the two ranges. Instead of going to the west of the Little Rocky Mountains, though I knew the Nez Perces to be in that direction, I marched along the base of the mountains on the east side, thereby concealing the command from the observation of the Indians, while my scouts were kept well on the crests of the mountains and to the west whenever possible.¹¹

In anticipation of hard and rapid marches, the soldiers transferred needed supplies --rations and ammunition--from the wagons to the pack mules, and moved out early on the 26th. A four-day forced march found Miles troops bivouacked for the evening of September 29 on the northeast side of the Little Rockies. The Nez Perces' were unaware of their presence.¹²

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C. The Nez Perces Tarry too Long

Meanwhile, the Nez Perces had slackened their gait. Again, as before the August 9 Big Hole fight, Looking Glass argued that the women and children needed rest and that the soldiers had been sufficiently outdistanced to allow a slower pace. In taking this stance, Looking Glass was living dangerously, because General Howard had deliberately fallen back in expectation of slowing the Nez Perces and giving Miles time to interpose between the Indians and their Canadian haven. Looking Glass asserted his will and, during each of the five days following their crossing of the Missouri, the Nez Perces stopped early in the afternoon as they traveled north. Hunters ranged ahead killing buffalo and other game. On September 29 the Indians passed between the Bear Paw and Little Rocky Mountains, and about noon Looking Glass called a halt. Camp was made, fires kindled and nourishing meals cooked.

The camp site was on Snake Creek, a narrow, twisting tributary of Milk River, some six miles north of the Bear Paws, and 45 miles south of the Canadian border. A cold rain fell intermittently and low lying clouds made the day particularly bleak, and the Indians pitched their lodges in the area sheltered by a crescent-shaped hollow bordering the stream. Sheltered from the cold north wind, the clans made their camps on the flats running north to south and flanking Snake Creek. The area was treeless with little brush along the creek for fuel, but buffalo chips were plentiful.¹³

D. A Surprise Attack and a Savage Repulse

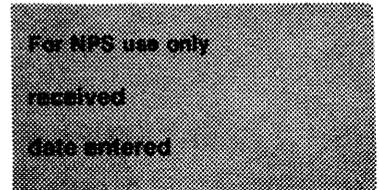
September 30 dawned clear and cold, with a skirt of ice on the streams. Heading west, Miles' column intercepted the Nez Perces' trail and wheeled north as the troops followed the tracks. As was their practice, several Cheyenne and Sioux scouts rode far out to the front. About 8 a.m. as Colonel Miles remembered:

Suddenly one of these advance scouts, a young warrior, was seen galloping at full speed back over the prairie. He said something in Sioux or Cheyenne to the Indians as he passed them, and it was evident that he brought information of the discovery of the Nez Perce camp.... They appeared to be perfectly wild with delight, and as unlike what they had seemed twenty minutes before as two scenes of a drama.¹⁴

The news flashed through Miles' ranks, and pulses quickened. Despite the raw, cold north wind, the bluecoats hastened forward with renewed vigor. Colonel Miles was unable to see the Indian encampment, but from the number of Indians running to the horse herd, he knew the soldiers' presence had been discovered. Rather than chance escape by the Nez Perces, he ordered an attack. The Indians had not posted sentinels and thus had no time to prepare for defense. The site they had chosen for their encampment, though no onslaught was anticipated, possessed certain advantages.

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The campground was located at the base of a crescent-shaped cove on the east side of Snake Creek. Although the upper end of the crescent of the southwest was only twenty-five feet higher than the bottomland, it prevented an effective approach from that angle. The other three sides were open, undulating grasslands. Therefore, the camp did not offer much in the way of protection from a dashing assault by cavalymen. Indeed, it provided a temptation for the adoption of such strategy. Although the campground was not chosen in the interest of protection against an attack, nevertheless it possessed several advantages. Snake Creek not only provided water, but had carved several coulees in the alluvial soil. Between the mouth of the two coulees a triangular bar, with its base along the creek, provided room for action. Whereas, the coulees being nearly six feet deep served as natural trenches. Even so, after Miles established his siege, the Indians excavated many jug-shaped foxholes with connecting tunnels There were no rocky crags, no windfalls of timber, behind which the besieged Indians might taunt attackers.¹⁵

At Miles' order, the two cavalry squadrons deployed from column left front into line and broke into a gallop. Captain Hale's 7th Cavalry, keeping to the east of Snake Creek, bore down on the camp; Captain Tyler's 2d Cavalry squadron, accompanied by the Cheyenne and Sioux scouts, veered to the left, crossed the creek, and headed for the pony herd pastured on the bench west of the hollow, and Captain Snyder's mounted infantry, the column's reserve, trailed Hale's 7th Cavalry troopers.

Hale's people quickly found themselves in a savage, no-quarter firefight. The approaches to the village from the south and east were obstructed by steep coulees, and, upon being alerted to the soldiers' approach, warriors clambered up the steep inclines and took cover along the crest. At a range of 200 yards, they blazed away with a deadly fire at the oncoming troopers. The horse soldiers faltered, dismounted, and were hard put to hold their ground, pending the arrival of Captain Snyder's infantry. The Nez Perces then pulled back to new positions nearer the village.¹⁶

Captain Tyler's command successfully discharged its mission. West of Snake Creek, the soldiers and the Cheyenne and Sioux scouts captured one-third of the Nez Perces' pony herd, numbering 600 to 700 animals. Under cover of the attack, some 60 warriors and a number of women and small children mounted on horses escaped and made their way toward Canada.¹⁷

The headlong attack on the village had been costly. Miles listed his casualties as 22 enlisted men killed and 38 wounded. The Nez Perces had prudently focused on officers and senior non-commissioned officers. Gunned down were Capts. Owen Hale, Myles Moylan, and Edward Godfrey; Lt. Jonathan W. Biddle of the 7th Cavalry; Lt. Henery Romeyn of the 5th Infantry; and Miles' adjutant Lt. George W. Baird. Hale and Biddle were, dead, the others severely injured. In the 7th Cavalry squadron, only one officer was still fit for duty. Casualties among the 7th's senior enlisted men were equally devastating. Seven sergeants, including the three 1st sergeants, were dead, while three buck sergeants and two corporals were wounded. Colonel Miles found these losses prohibitive and by 3 p.m. called off the attack and laid siege to the village.¹⁸

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Lack of adequate warning and the wild abandon of the initial charge caused confusion in the Indian camp. Chief Joseph recalled:

I thought of my wife and children, who were now surrounded by soldiers, and I resolved to go to them or die . . . , I dashed unarmed through the line of soldiers. It seemed to me there were guns on every side, before and behind me. My clothes were cut to pieces and my horse was wounded, but I was not hurt. As I reached the door of my lodge, my wife handed me my rifle, saying, "Here's your gun. Fight."

The soldiers kept up a continuous fire. Six of my men were killed in one spot near me. Ten or twelve soldiers charged into our camp and got possession of two lodges, killing three Nez Perce and losing three of their men, who fell inside our lines. I called my men to drive them back. We fought at close range, not more than twenty steps apart, and drove the soldiers back upon their main line, leaving their dead in our hands. We secured their arms and ammunition. We lost, the first day and night, eighteen men and three women.¹⁹

Unfortunately for the Nez Percés, their fatalities included many of their leading chiefs and bravest warriors. Ollokot, Joseph's younger brother, was killed early in the fighting, as was Too-hool-hool-zote. Also cut down was Poker Joe, a mixed-blood who had served as guide since the passage of the Butterroot Valley and whose influence had become increasingly important in the Nez Perce councils.²⁰

E. The Five-Day Siege

After occupying the high ground and closely investing the Indian village, Colonel Miles called for his artillery. The Hotchkiss gun was positioned and opened fire, hurling an occasional shell into the "seemingly deserted hollow." The bombardment proved ineffective because the gun's muzzle could not be depressed sufficiently to bear on the valley below, where the Indians were digging rifle-pits in the soft, moist earth. Miles' people sought to cut the Nez Percés off from water by sending two troops of cavalry down the hill to take and hold the creek, but heavy small arms fire from the Indians forced the soldiers back. As darkness fell, turning a chilly, rainy day into a cold, snowy night, the troops kept watch on the heights; Nez Perce warriors dug rifle-pits on the middle slopes; and down in the valley bottom old men, women, and children excavated a protective network of spiderholes and, tunnels that in the next few days and nights became amazing in extent.²¹

From the afternoon of September 30 to the surrender in mid-afternoon on October 5, the siege continued. A heavy snow fell during the first night of the siege, and, by daybreak on October 1, five inches of snow blanketed the ground. The weather on the northern plains was unseasonably cold. The soldiers, initially, suffered more from the elements than the Indians. Until the slow moving wagon train came up with camp equipment and supplies, they had no tents. There was then a pronounced improvement in the soldiers' living conditions.²²

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Such was not the situation among the besieged. A young brave, Yellow Wolf, recalled the scene on the third day of the siege:

Morning came, bringing the battle anew. Bullets from everywhere! A big gun throwing bursting shells. From rifle pits, warriors returned shot for shot. Wild and stormy, the cold wind was thick with snow. Air filled with smoke of powder. Flash of guns through it all. As the hidden sun traveled upward, the war did not weaken. . . [Cooking facilities in the camp were meager]. . . . Buffalo chips, though abundant, became buried the first night of the siege beneath a blanket of snow and were available only under cover of darkness A young warrior, wounded, lay on a buffalo robe dying without complaint. Children crying with cold. No fire. There could be no light. Everywhere the crying, the death wail All night we remained in those pits. The cold grew stronger. The wind was filled with snow. Only a little sleep. There might be a charge by the soldiers. The warriors watched by turns. A long night I felt the coming end. All for which we had suffered lost. ²³

After changing their plans from taking up residence among the Crows to a flight to Canada, the Nez Perces, after crossing the Missouri, had made a fatal blunder by deliberately traveling too slow. Now that they were encircled, the Indians were sustained by the expectation that the messengers who crept out of camp during the nights would find Sitting Bull in Canada and induce him and his Sioux to hasten to their relief. Sitting Bull was un eager to add to his unpopularity in the United States and did not intervene to help the besieged Nez Perces. These disappointments, coupled with the steady decline in individual physical strength as well as the attrition in numbers, further discouraged the embattled bands. The deaths of Ollokot, Too-hool-hool-zote, and Poker Joe underscored the disappearance of the old tribal vigor. Leadership and responsibility were now shared by Chief Joseph, White Bird, and Looking Glass.

On October 3 Colonel Miles wrote his wife:

We have been again successful. We surprised the Nez Perce camp at 8:00 Sunday morning and captured almost their entire herd We have a very large herd and many of their prominent men were killed At present, we have them closely surrounded and under fire, and they may yet give up I cannot tell how long I shall be detained in this country.²⁴

Though Miles' letter was upbeat, he, not knowing how Sitting Bull would respond to the Nez Perces' call, was concerned about the possibility of intervention. He also fretted about the possibility that General Howard would put in an appearance to assume command and share in the credit for capture of the Nez Perces. On October 1 Miles had sent out a flag of truce and suggested a parley. White Bird and Looking Glass, the former prophesizing that "surrender would entail disillusionment, sorrow, and death," wanted nothing to do with negotiations, but Chief Joseph, ever mindful of the welfare of the people, was more favorably disposed to accept honorable terms and met with Miles. Their talk was unproductive, and Miles, violating his own flag of truce, detained Joseph. Coincidentally, Lt. Lovell H. Jerome, believing the Indians were about to surrender,

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wandered into the village and was taken prisoner. Miles furious that Jerome had cancelled his advantage, released Joseph on the 2d, and the Nez Perces then freed Jerome.²⁵

The siege dragged on. On the morning of October 4 the soldiers, brought up the 12-pounder Napoleon. Employing it in mortar fashion by burying its trail, they finally registered a hit that caused casualties. Yellow Wolf remembered:

It was towards noon that a bursting shell struck and broke a shelter pit, burying four women, a little boy, and a girl of about twelve snows. This girl, Atsipeeten, her grandmother, Intetah, were both killed. The other three women and the boy were rescued. The two dead were left in the cave-in pit.²⁶

That evening General Howard and his orderly, accompanied by a small escort, arrived at the Bear Paw siege site. Colonel Miles initially greeted the general coolly. But, upon being assured by Howard that "he had no desire to assume immediate command of the field but would be glad to have him finish the work he had so well begun," Miles' morale soared and his demeanor toward his comrade of bloody Civil War battles became open and friendly.²⁷ Thus, Colonel Miles was destined to reap the publicity as the capturer of Joseph's band while General Howard's forces, which had carried out the long marches and the bulk of the campaign from Idaho to the Bear Paws, received scant mention in the press.

F. Chief Joseph and Colonel Miles Prepare to Meet

Simultaneously, a similar situation was jelling in the camp of the besieged that would enhance the reputation of Chief Joseph as a leader of his people. Joseph, unlike Miles, was not ambitious, but he was destined to be seen by historians as the defeated hero and, subsequently, most Americans accepted that "Red Napoleon's" legends of military leadership because of the role that circumstances forced him to play. But, even before the Battle of the Bear Paw, General Howard and others had thought of Joseph as the leader of the hostile Nez Perces. As Historian Beal has summarize:

Thus, in two simultaneous councils in opposite sides of the battleground, it was decided that the principal roles in the impending negotiations would be played by Joseph and Miles respectively. Their ascendancy was due to a combination of fate and the magnanimity of their peers. Each was destined to play his part so well that he would not only tower above his fellow warriors in the surrender scene the next afternoon but forever after.²⁸

Traveling with General Howard were Nez Perce scouts, Captain John and Old George. At the general's behest they entered the hostile camp under a flag of truce. Pleased to hear that both their daughters were still alive, the two scouts urged the Nez Perces to surrender. Howard's column was a day's march away, they said, and when it arrived further resistance would be fruitless. Surrender would involve no trials or executions; those who surrendered would be given food, clothing, medical care, and honorable treatment as prisoners of war. Furthermore, it was the expressed intention of the military that when the Indians laid down their arms they were to be returned to the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho.

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Even on these terms, Chief White Bird would not surrender. Though in his seventies, he stated that he would rather die in a desperate attempt to reach freedom in Canada than go back to Lapwai as a prisoner of the white man. Looking Glass felt the same way. "I am older than you," he said to Chief Joseph, "I have my experiences with a man of two faces and two tongues. If you surrender, you will be sorry; and in your sorrow you will feel rather to be dead, than suffer that deception."

"Many of our people are out on the hills, naked and freezing," Joseph replied. "The women are suffering with cold, the children crying with the chilly dampness of the shelter pits. For myself I do not care. It is for them I am going to surrender."

"I will never surrender to a deceitful white chief," Looking Glass retorted.²⁹

This was the last conversation between the two leaders. A short while later, as Looking Glass lay smoking and talking with other warriors in one of the exposed rifle-pits, his attention was called to the approach of a mounted Indian.

Believing that the Sioux had at last arrived to rescue them from their besiegers, the chief sprang up out of the pit, looking at the Indian in the distance. He turned to call out the news to his comrades, when a bullet struck his forehead, and he fell dead instead at their feet. This was the last Nez Perce casualty of the Bear Paw battle, and the only man to be killed after the first day's fighting. The only other casualties after the initial attack were the woman and child smothered in the cave-in shelter pit.³⁰

G. The Surrender

The debate ended, and Chief Joseph prepared to meet with Colonel Miles and General Howard at a site marked by a buffalo robe, midway between the camps of the contending forces. As Chief Joseph prepared to meet the white leaders,

He understood that a full surrender of his people, that is, all who chose to follow him, would eventuate in their return to the Clearwater country. He could hardly expect to regain their ancestral homelands, but rather that the terms originally governing their removal to the Lapwai Reservation would be met.³¹

The scene was characteristic of many Indian surrenders. Lacking the pomp and protocol of surrenders of enemy armies, the capitulation of Joseph's band presented a pathetic picture. The participants assembled amid the dead and rotting horses on the bleak battlefield. The dead and wounded of both sides represented the misery of war. The Indians were a "non-descript, rag-tag, bob-tailed" lot. Except for a few officers who had carried extra wearing apparel, the soldiers also presented a rather grimy, disheveled appearance. Colonel Miles' Nez Perce messengers were called to the cheerless coulees and told that the Nez Percés would surrender in a little while. The messengers, flanked by three officers and "interpreter" Arthur Chapman, next took their stance upon the parley ground.

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Toward evening, on December 5, Joseph rode forth from the coulees, followed by several warriors on foot. The character of the day was in keeping with the sad event about to occur. A snow-filled wind swirled down from the Bear Paws and swept the prairie. Joseph's hair hung in two braids on either side of his face. He wore a blanket and moccasin leggings. His rifle was across the pommel in front of him. When he dismounted he walked to General Howard and offered him the rifle. Howard waved him to Miles. He then walked to Miles and handed him the rifle. Then he stepped back and began his speech:

Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. The old men are all killed. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food; no one knows where they are, perhaps freezing to death. I want time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs, I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more.³²

Joseph surrendered 87 men, 184 women, and 147 children. The rest of those in the village, not killed in the fighting, escaped either during Miles' initial September 30 attack or with White Bird on the night of October 5 after Joseph's surrender. According to records of the Northwest Mounted police, 98 warriors and some 200 women and children succeeded in reaching Sitting Bull's village.³³

The surrender enabled the military to make out their reports and Chief Joseph to examine the condition of the remainder of his followers. Casualties in the battle were nearly equal. Twenty-five Nez Perces were killed, compared to twenty-four soldiers, who were either killed in the battle or died shortly after from the wounds they received. The number of wounded less those who died from wounds was: Nez Perce, 46 and the soldiers, 44.

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- 1 Robert M. Utley, Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and Indian, 1866-1890 (New York, 1973), p. 324.
- 2 U.S. Secretary of War's Annual Report, (1877), House Executive Document, No. 1, p. 2, 45th Congress, 2d Sess. Vol. 2 (Serial 1794), p. 15.
- 3 Ibid., p. 529.
- 4 Utley, Frontier Regulars, p. 325.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 325-26.
6. Ibid., p. 320; Secretary of War's Annual Report (1877), pp. 74-6.
7. Utley, Frontier Regulars, pp. 320-21.
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9. Nelson A. Miles, Personal Recollections and Observations (Chicago, 1986), p. 264.
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11. Ibid., p. 266.
12. Gulick, Chief Joseph Country, p. 262; Utley, Frontier Regulars, p. 321.
13. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest (New Haven), 1965), pp. 615-16; Francis Haines, The Nez Percés: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau (Norman, 1955), pp. 273-75.
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15. Beal, Merrill D., "I Will Fight No More Forever": Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce War (New York), 1967, pp. 210-11.
16. Utley, Frontier Regulars, pp. 321-22.
17. Ibid., p. 321; Gulick, Chief Joseph Country, p. 264.
18. Utley, Frontier Regulars, p. 322; Beal, "I Will Fight No More Forever," 211-12.

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19. Beale, "I Will Fight No More Forever," pp. 213-16.
20. Gulick, Chief Joseph Country, p. 264; Utley, Frontier Regulars, p. 322.
21. Gulick, Chief Joseph Country, p. 264.
22. Ibid., 265.
23. Beal, "I Will Fight No More Forever," pp. 213-16.
24. Virginia Johnson, The Unregimented General: A Biography of Nelson A. Miles (Boston, 1962), p. 203.
25. Utley, Frontier Regulars, pp. 321-22; Beal, "I Will Fight No More Forever," p. 219; Gulick, Chief Joseph Country, pp. 265-68.
26. Lucullus V. McWhorter, Yellow Wolf: His Own Story (Caldwell, 1948), pp. 218-19.
27. Lucullus V. McWorter, Hear Me, My Chief! (Caldwell, 1952), p. 491; Utley, Frontier Regulars, p. 323.
28. Beal, "I Will Fight No More Forever," ,p. 227.
29. McWhorter, Hear Me, p. 495; Duncan MacDonald to McWhorter, Dec. 15, 1929; Gulick, Chief Joseph Country, pp. 268-69.
30. McWhorter, Hear Me, p. 495.
31. Beal, "I Will Fight No More Forever," p. 228.
32. McWhorter, Hear Me, pp. 497-98; Annual Report of the Secretary of War (Washington, D.C., 1877). 1:630, "Howard's Official Report, December 27, 1877," from a transcription made by C.E.S. Wood as the interpreter translated Joseph's remarks.
33. Utley, Frontier Regulars, p. 323.

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The Bear Paw battleground and siege site are situated within the following described boundary: beginning at the intersection of corners of Sections 1, 2, 11, and 12 of Township 30 North, Range 19 East and State Secondary Highway 240; then north 1/4 mile with the line between Sections 1 and 2; then east 3/4 of a mile ; then south 3/4 of a mile; then west 3/4 of a mile to the boundary between Sections 11 and 12; and then north 1/2 mile with the boundary between Sections 11 and 12 to the place of beginning. The total acreage included in the nomination is 360 acres, and it includes all the acreage significantly involved in the battle, siege, and surrender.



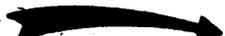
NORTH

BEAD'S PAW BATTLE

SEPT. 30 - OCT. 5
1877

SKIRMISH LINES

ARMY  INDIANS 

CAVALRY CHARGE 

INDIAN INCAMPMENT 



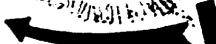
HORSE HERD

COUNTY

SURRENDERED 

FIRST DAY CHARGE 

COL. MILES CHARGE
SEPT. 30

FIRST DAY CHARGE 

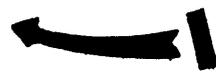
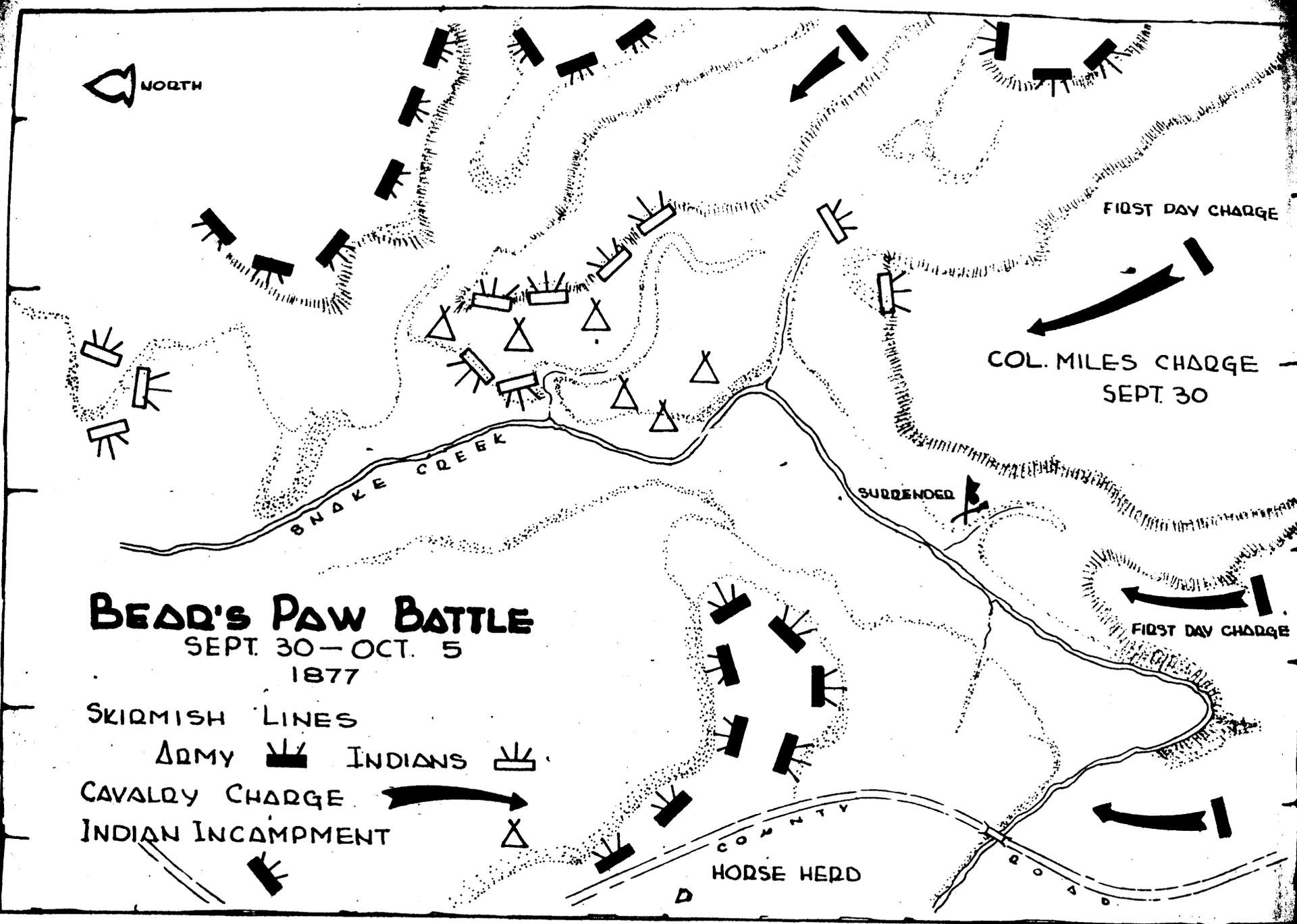


FIGURE NO. 4



C A N A D A

WASHINGTON

N. DAKOTA

OREGON

IDAHO

M O N T A N A

S. DAKOTA

WYOMING

WALLOWA LAKE

FT. MISSOULA

CHINOOK

BILLINGS

FT. KEOGH
MILES CITY

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK



BATTLES & INCIDENTS OF CAMPAIGN

- 1. WHITEBIRD JUNE 17
- 2. CLEADWATER JULY 11
- 3. FORT FIZZLE JULY 25
- 4. BIG HOLE AUGUST 9-10
- 5. CAMAS AUGUST 20
- 6. CANYON CREEK SEPT. 13
- 7. COW ISLAND SEPT. 21
- 8. BEARS PAW SEPT 30 - OCTOBER 5

NEZ PERCE CAMPAIGN 1877

ROUTE OF NEZ PERCE RETREAT →

← ROUTE OF COL. MILES 7TH CAVALRY