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Where Did the Nez Perces

by William L. Lang

On October 5, 1877, at the end of one of the truly heroic episodes in the Indian Wars in the Northwest, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perces surrendered to General Nelson A. Miles on a snow-dusted battlefield along Snake Creek near present-day Havre, Montana. The Indians gave up just forty-some miles short of their destination—the international border with Canada, where they hoped to find a sanctuary. They had been pursued for nearly three months and over thirteen hundred miles from their reservation in central Idaho, testing the military’s skill and their own stamina. In his surrender message, Joseph described his people’s condition as destitute and his warriors as tired of the struggle. “I will fight no more forever”—purportedly Joseph’s words—became an anthem and was symbolic of the Nez Perces’ struggle and failure to escape the military’s inevitable maw.

A few more days of either better weather or more strength might have changed the tragic outcome of this nearly legendary tale of heroics on the Montana plains. What had prevented the Nez Perces from outdistancing their pursuers? How had they been able to succeed for hundreds of miles and months of deprivation only to fall short during the first weeks of autumn?

Part of the explanation is in Yellowstone National Park. It was in Yellowstone that the Nez Perces took their only rest during the long march. Having consistently outmaneuvered the military since their flight in central Idaho in July, the eight hundred or more Nez Perces had pushed themselves and their nearly two thousand head of stock as hard as they could. But in Yellowstone, with the military several days behind them, they paused for nearly two weeks, time enough to have outraced the harsh autumn weather and the military’s pincer to gain sanctuary in Canada.

Why did the Indians stay so long in the Park? And exactly where did they go? These two questions have puzzled journalists and historians ever since the surrender, and the answers that have been proposed have never been satisfactory. Too many contradictions remain unresolved and too many important issues have been ignored by historians, whose inattention to details of the geography and ignorance of the landforms have sent them literally on the wrong trails. Their misreading of the documents and their mistaken assumptions about Indian leadership have led them even further astray. Most importantly, they have misunderstood the Indians’ purpose. The clues have been there all along, both in the documents and on the ground in Yellowstone National Park.
Go in Yellowstone in 1877?
Retracing the physical route of the Nez Perces and the documentary trail left by military, civilian, and Indian sources is part detective work and part primer on the importance of details in reconstructing historic events. The sources are meager: military reports and official histories; contemporary news stories and articles; popular accounts; a few diaries, letters, and memoirs of participants; and Indian oral histories. But the information is there, if only the right questions are asked.

The right questions begin with the history of the events during the summer of 1877. Because of political, economic, and especially religious and cultural conflicts, bands of Nez Perces on their reservation in central Idaho (led principally by Joseph, Looking Glass, and White Bird) chose to flee for sanctuary rather than engage frontier military forces that had been sent to chastise them. A key figure in the conflict, Chief Joseph, had unwillingly led his band from its homeland in northeastern Oregon to the reservation in Idaho just before the military began its disciplinary action. Heading east from the Clearwater River in July, with General O. O. Howard and the 7th Infantry in pursuit, the Nez Perces engaged in a flee-hide-and-retreat strategy to successfully outmaneuver the often slow moving military, following a difficult trail over Lolo Pass and down into Montana’s Bitterroot Valley.

In Montana, the Nez Perces made their second major decision, which committed them to traversing some of the roughest terrain in North America. After the Indians had skirted the barricades that Captain C. C. Rawn from Fort Missoula had thrown up at the bottom of Lolo Canyon—afterward known as “Fort Fizzle”—the chiefs argued about where they should go. Most wanted to avoid a fight, with at least one leader warning that it could only end in complete destruction. White Bird and Red Owl wanted to head north through the Flathead Indian Reservation directly to Canada and safety. But Looking Glass urged going south and east to the Yellowstone country and the Crow country, as Looking Glass reportedly argued, “the Crows had promised them that whenever the Nez Perces fought the whites they would join them.”

This was one of several times during the flight when Nez Perce leaders hotly debated what tactics to employ and which route to take. Whites have consistently misinterpreted the content and purpose of these councils. To observers familiar with military decision making, the Indians’ discussions have suggested confusion and disorganization of the worst kind, dominated by indecision and inefficiency. Although we do not know many of the details, it is clear that the Nez Perce leaders chose their route as they went by solving problems through council discussions. In this case, Looking Glass evidently convinced his fellow chiefs that going to Crow country by way of the Bitterroot and Big Hole valleys was the safest route.

Their decision to camp in the Big Hole Valley in early August, however, turned out to be tragic. John Gibbon’s troops from Fort Shaw and an undisciplined company of volunteers surprised the Nez Perces in a pre-dawn raid. The whites inflicted heavy losses and destroyed most of the Nez Perces’ household goods. “It was a dreadful sight,” Major Edwin Mason of the 7th Infantry wrote his wife after the battle, “dead men, women and children. More squaws were killed than men.” The Nez Perces rallied to fight off the raiders and then reeled from the battle in anger and facing a dire situation. In pain and sorrow, they carried with them the remnants of their households and raced headlong east from the battlefield, trying to shake Howard and Gibbon. By

1. Within two years, articles were published in national periodicals about the Nez Perce flight and Chief Joseph. The first by a participant was The Wonders of Geyser Land: A Trip to the Yellowstone National Park of Wyoming (Black Earth, Wisconsin: Burnett & Son, 1878), written by Frank Carpenter, a tourist captured by the Nez Perces in Yellowstone. Carpenter’s account created several myths about the Indians’ motives and actions. One year later, St. Rev. W. H. Hare edited “Chief Joseph’s Own Story,” in North American Review (April 1879), which told the story purportedly in Joseph’s own words. Thomas A. Sutherland, a journalist who accompanied the military during part of the pursuit, wrote Howard’s Campaign Against the Nez Perce Indians (Portland: A. G. Walling, 1878) and contributed significantly to the image of Joseph as a military genius. Ami Frank Mulford’s Fighting Indians in the 7th United States Cavalry (Corning, New York: Paul L. Mulford, 1878) added to Joseph’s military reputation. By 1881, when O. O. Howard wrote Nez Perce Joseph: As Account of His Ancestors, His Lands, His Confederates, His Enemies, His Murders, His War, His Pursuit and Capture (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1881), Joseph’s field generalship and sagacity were already established in the popular mind, although Howard believed Joseph and his band to be “savage” and “treacherous.” See O. O. Howard, letter to editor, (Portland) Oregonian May 3, 1879. For a corrective on Joseph as a military genius, see Mark H. Brown, “The Joseph Myth,” Montana, the Magazine of Western History 22 (Winter 1972): 2-17.


3. A confidant of the Nez Perces, fur trader Duncan McDonald, got this information in conversations with Nez Perces in Canada after the flight and reported them in a series of letters published in New Northwest (Deer Lodge, Montana), January 10, January 17, February 7, 1879. At this point of decision, and likely others, the Nez Perces had alternative plans. According to McDonald, White Bird had been prepared to charge Rawn’s breastworks, torch the whole area, burn out ranchers, and race north to Canada.

4. According to McDonald, there were discussions among the chiefs about going to Crow country and staying there over the spring and returning to Idaho later in the next spring. New Northwest, January 17, 1879. In Flight of the Nez Perce (202), Mark Brown described the Indians’ decision to flee to Montana as likely the result of Indians “quarreling among themselves” and “their naive and simple analysis of their problem.”

5. Edwin Mason to Mrs. Mason, August 13, 1877, Mason Letters, MC 80, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena [MISHA].
The Nez Perces entered Yellowstone National Park with no knowledge about Lieutenant Gustavus Doane's troops, which patrolled up the Yellowstone River from Fort Ellis. They also did not know that Colonel Samuel Sturgis at Crow Agency on the Yellowstone was primed to block their exit from the Absaroka Mountains.
mid-August and after another battle, the Nez Perces entered Yellowstone National Park, exhausted and edgy about whites but relieved that the military lagged a few days behind them.

Once in the Park, the Nez Perces complicated their flight and put themselves in additional jeopardy. As they moved east up the Madison River, their advance guard encountered and captured two prospectors and nine Montana tourists near the Lower Geyser Basin along the Firehole River. Fearing that any one of them might alert the military to their location, the Nez Perces decided to keep the whites in their camp and under surveillance. They had little alternative, but their decision had significant consequences in the enfolding drama. Several tourists would escape from the camp and give valuable information to the military about the Nez Perces' route, allowing Howard and his superiors to plan an encirclement of the Indians. The Nez Perces' capture of the tourists also increased the pressure on Howard to catch the fleeing Indians. And in the Indians' camp, the presence of the tourists created friction between those who wanted to take vengeance on them for the brutality of the Big Hole battle and those who wanted to avoid any more conflict.

During the next thirteen days, from August 24 to September 5, the Nez Perces slowed their march, while Howard caught up and other military units moved in from the north and east to intercept them. The Indians traveled slowly, taking hours to string into camp and hours more to move back on to the trail. Each family and larger band trailed their own horses, carried their own household goods, and camped together. The white prisoners, traveling behind the women's pack train, were under the control of Lean Elk, a mixed-blood who spoke English. In reconstructing the events from this point in the story, three things should be kept in mind: the Nez Perces traveled in separate bands with no individual in overall command; they were unsure of which route they wanted to take; and, although they had some knowledge of the military's positions, they had no idea of its strategy.

The standard version of what the Nez Perces did in Yellowstone originated in an article published in James Mills's *New Northwest* in mid-September 1877, while the Indians were still eluding the military's grasp in central Montana. Its source, John Shively, was one of the people the Nez Perces had captured in the Park. Shively had been held by the Indians for eleven days before he managed to escape in early September and hike through the wilderness to the nearest Montana settlements, where he began telling his incredible story. Shively gave the *New Northwest* editor a detailed account of the Nez Perces, complete with descriptions of camp life, speed of travel, and presumed conflicts among Indian leaders. As compelling today as it must have been in 1877, Shively's story emphasized danger and his backwoods savvy in making a thrilling dash for freedom. His descrip-

William Henry Jackson took this photograph of Looking Glass when the Nez Perce chief was on an earlier trip to Crow Country in 1871.

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lead them through the Absaroka Mountains—the east boundary of the Park. But once the Indians were east of the Yellowstone River and heading toward the Shoshone River and the route to Crow country, a “Snake chief” had claimed he knew the way and Shively was retired as guide. But instead of turning southeast and heading toward the Shoshone, the Nez Percé had ended up on the headwaters of the Lamar River (the East Fork of the Yellowstone). Shively claimed that he had known they were lost but had said nothing until after a “council of chiefs,” when the Nez Percé asked him: “Which way to Crow country?” Shively had shown them “the open country about 20 miles off toward the Crow Country,” evidently from a high point of land near the Nez Percé’s camp. He had escaped from his captors during that night, leaving the Indians to pursue the route he had shown them.8

The only other detailed account we have of the Indians’ movements in Yellowstone comes from the journal of S. G. Fisher, chief of Howard’s scouts. Staying as close to the retreating Indians as they could, Fisher and some forty Bannock Indian scouts followed the Nez Percé east from the Yellowstone River to the headwaters of the Lamar, sending back reports to Howard. The only description of the Indians’ route through the Absaroka Mountains is in Fisher’s words.9

Using Fisher’s published journal, the reports of military commands, Shively’s account, and information from a few Indian informants, historians have proposed several different routes that the Nez Percé might have taken through the mountains. All of the creeks that drain west from the Absarokas into the Lamar River—Soda Butte, Calfee, Cache, and Miller—have been identified as the Nez Percé’s route, but the most recent histories have settled on either Cache Creek or Miller Creek as the most likely.10 A fresh examination of the sources and Yellowstone’s topography, however, suggests that the main body of the Nez Percé followed the upper Lamar, that the Indians did not travel in one large group, and that they were never lost in the Park.

9. “Journal of S. G. Fisher,” Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana, 10 vols. (Boston: J. S. Canner, 1906), 2: 269-282. Fisher’s original journal, from which the Contributions article was taken, is in the Idaho Historical Society Archives, Boise. The original journal differs in several respects from the published version, which omits crucial details and introduces phrases and terms not present in the original. I am indebted to Cheryl Wilfong for first pointing out these discrepancies to me.

Then they could either turn south and cross a lusher valley of knee-deep grass, where their large herd of stock could feast. From this verdant haven, there were only a few routes that would take the Indians to buffalo country on the lower Yellowstone. There were not many passes through the Absarokas and few easy pathways through the dense lodgepole forest that carpeted the terrain below 8,000 feet in elevation. Heading toward the Absaroka range from Pelican Creek, the Indians had to make their trail over a low divide. Then they could either turn south and cross a higher divide to the Shoshone River drainage or continue east to the headwaters of the Lamar River at the base of the imposing Absarokas. The easiest path to the lower Yellowstone was down the Shoshone River; the next easiest routes, especially for such a large group, were either down the Lamar River and the lower canyons of the Yellowstone to broader valley terrain near present-day Livingston, Montana, or east up Soda Butte Creek and the upper section of the Clark’s Fork of the Yellowstone, which cut through the eastern section of the Absarokas. The most difficult routes pierced the 11,000-foot-high Absaroka mountain chain—the narrow slots created by Miller, Cache, and Calfee creeks and the upper Lamar River.

After capturing John Shively and the Montana tourists near the Firehole River on August 23-24, the Nez Perces moved east toward the Yellowstone River on a route that took them south of Mary Mountain. Along the trail, there was a commotion when several warriors threatened the tourists and shot George Cowan at point-blank range, leaving him for dead. During the fracas, five of the tourists escaped, taking their story and a description of the Nez Perces’ location to Howard’s troops at Henry’s Lake. The three remaining tourists—Emma Cowan and Idi and Frank Carpenter—along with Shively and James C. Irwin, a recently discharged soldier the Indians had also captured, were pulled back into the Indians’ procession. The Nez Perces trailed eastward along the southern fringe of the Hayden Valley to a ford across the Yellowstone River about four miles below Yellowstone Lake. They camped on the east bank of the river, discussed what to do with the captives, and decided to release Mrs. Cowan and the Carpenters on August 25. The Indians gave the women horses but put Frank Carpenter afoot, thereby slowing the tourists’ travel to the settlements. Taking Shively and Irwin along with them, the Indians continued east toward the Absarokas. 11

The next day, while S. G. Fisher and his scouts were inspecting the site where Cowan had been shot, the Indians moved their camp north to Yellowstone Lake near present-day Indian Pond. On August 28, Fisher quickened his pursuit, following the Nez Perces’ trail and crossing the Yellowstone, where they “passed one of the enemy’s camps” and very nearly caught the Indians in camp by the lake. More interested in booty than conflict, Fisher’s Bannock Indian scouts scattered when they saw two Nez Perce warriors. As Fisher jotted in his journal: “I told them [Bannocks] what I thought of their bravery.” Switching to a fresh horse, Fisher pursued the Indians alone, going “up Pelican Creek about 10 miles, left it and went onto Mt., saw smoke from enemy camp.” He got a good fix on the Indians’ position and made his way down Pelican Creek, arriving in camp on the Yellowstone “about midnight.” 12

Fisher spent the next two days in camp, arguing with his scouts and recovering from a stomach ailment. Howard’s scouts brought Fisher a new horse and word that George Cowan had been found alive. Emma Cowan and the Carpenters had also made their way safely to Mammoth, after being picked up west of Mt. Washburn on August 27 by soldiers from Fort Ellis who had been sent on a scouting party into the Park. After dismissing twenty-two of his Bannock scouts, Fisher selected a few Bannocks and some good frontiersmen in his camp, prepared his gear, and started off on the morning of August 31 to track the Nez Perces through the dense lodgepole forest below the Absarokas. 13

While Fisher had been weeding his force, the Nez Perces had moved their camps over the Pelican divide. By August 31, they were on the headwaters of the Lamar River, at the base of the Absarokas. Probably the largest group to ever penetrate the Yellowstone wilderness, the Indians moved slowly, caravanning in several large bands. The group spread out over a mile wide when they crossed the Pelican Valley’s lush meadows, then narrowed down to practically single-file columns when they ascended and descended the canyons. They left an unmistakable trail, one Fisher had little difficulty following. Howard’s aide-de-


In selecting their camps in Yellowstone, the Nez Perces had to find enough pasturage for their enormous herd of horses. The Pelican Creek and upper Lamar River drainages—with wide meadows and lush grasses—were superb locations that may have reminded them of their homeland in Idaho and Oregon.

Main Indian route

Probable scouting parties

Places and Events
1. Fording Yellowstone
2. Camp at Yellowstone Lake
3. Where Shively thought the Nez Perces became lost
4. Meadow where horse herd grazed for several days
5. Looking Glass/Lean Elk camp where Shively was held prisoner
6. Joseph’s camp
7. Mouth of upper Lamar River—the “trap”
8. Hoodoo Basin, where Joseph and Looking Glass probably rendezvoused
9. Baronett’s bridge
camp, Charles E. S. Wood described the Nez Perce "horde":

with their vast band of horses, [they] swept their path clean of subsistence, forage, and supplies, so that where they had abundance our ration was scanty... Where their animals grazed ours starved; where they had a horde of 2,000 fresh horses to replace their exhausted stock, we found only the useless ones they had abandoned.14

How much Joseph, Looking Glass, and other Nez Perce leaders knew about the army's movements and how they responded to the information from their own scouts is not clear, but it is certain that the Indians knew of Howard's position, the location of ranches along the Yellowstone River, the existence of tourist parties in the Park, and the advance of additional troops from Fort Ellis. Once over the Pelican Creek divide on August 28—with Fisher trailing them—the Nez Perces sent scouts to find the best route through the mountains. It is likely that one of these scouting parties brought back information that turned the Indians away from crossing over to the Shoshone River. According to Hugh L. Scott, a young officer who accompanied Lieutenant Gustavus Doane's command from Fort Ellis, Chief Joseph told him repeatedly in later years that the Nez Perces had intended to go down the Yellowstone, "leaving the mountains where the river turns northeast—now the site of the town of Livingston." The Indians decided against the route, Joseph told Scott, when Nez Perce scouts encountered Doane's small force coming up the Yellowstone on August 31.15

This explanation raises questions. If the Nez Perces intended to descend the Yellowstone, why did they cross the river in the first place? Why not go down the river on the west bank? When the Indians entered the Park, they came up the Madison River to the Firehole, not north to Indian Creek on the Bannock Trail, a traditional Indian route across the Yellowstone Plateau. When they enlisted Shively as a guide on August 24, the Nez Perces wanted to take the most direct route to Crow country—east through Yellowstone and down the Shoshone. Once they had crossed the Yellowstone on August 25, the Nez Perces sent representatives to enlist the aid of the Crows, but they returned with bad news: the Crows wanted no part of the Nez Perces' trouble. The Nez Perces then set their route down the Lamar and Yellowstone rivers, as Joseph told Scott, because "they did not wish to encounter any more troops on their front, with the risk of being caught between two forces." Ironically, if the Indians had gone down the Yellowstone they would have run headlong into Colonel S. D. Sturgis's 360-man force, which was then at Crow Agency on the Stillwater River ready to catch the Nez Perces in a pincer.16

In Shively's account, after the Indians had moved him as guide, they had "merely gone around a mountain and came down on the same tributary waters instead of crossing the divide [to the Shoshone River]." As Shively saw it, the Indians had become confused by the landscape and had gotten "lost."17 To questions put to them many years later by historian Lucullus McWhorter, Nez Perce veterans of the trek through Yellowstone had other answers.

McWhorter: Was Joseph lost in Yellowstone National Park?
Nez Perce: Chief Joseph never lost there, maybe another man lost there.
McWhorter: Was Joseph lost in Yellowstone National Park?
Nez Perce: I am (surely) no way to get lost, because Paul Jackson father was leading the entire procession at that day. He name was Hootoe-e, it means something like mix with tobacco... he was familiar with the country east of the Rocky Mountains... he always live there, raised there, and the Indians depend on him at that day.18

The Indians were not lost in Yellowstone, but they were in a quandary about which route would be the safest. Their only information came from the several scouting-raiding parties they had sent out as they moved east across the Park. On August 26, one of these parties charged a group of tourists from Helena in their camp at Otter Creek, not far from the falls of the Yellowstone. The raiders fired on the campers, chased them on horseback, looted their camp, and left one tourist dead before they returned to the Nez Perces' main camp at Indian Pond. Three days later, another raiding party descended the Yellowstone below present-day Gardiner and looted and burned the ranch of the Henderson brothers. Scott's men chased the Indians back up the river,

15. Hugh Lenox Scott, Some Memories of a Soldier (New York: The Century Company, 1928), 64-65. Scott wrote: "I was first told of this by Joseph in 1877, and his information was confirmed by a signed statement obtained by the Nez Perce agent at Nespelem, Washington."
16. Lean Elk, the mixed-blood who had responsibility for Shively and Irwin, told them after they had crossed the Yellowstone that scouts had been sent to get aid from the Crows. Shively's account, New Northwest, September 14, 1877; Scott, Memories of a Soldier, 65; Thomas B. Marquis, Memoirs of a White Crow Indian (New York: Century Company, 1928), 128-130.
17. New Northwest, September 14, 1877. There is some question whether Shively was actually the Indians' principal guide. Responding to queries by Lucullus McWhorter, J. W. Reddington suggested that Irwin guided the Indians and that Shively was actually "boss of the packtrain." J. W. Reddington to Lucullus McWhorter, January 20, March 10, 1931, Folder 175, #13, and Folder 158, #63, Lucullus McWhorter Papers, Washington State University Archives, Pullman [McWhorter Papers]. Yellow Wolf also told McWhorter that Shively guided the Indians for only part of one day, when they were west of the Yellowstone River. McWhorter, Yellow Wolf, 170.
18. Lucullus McWhorter's interrogations, Folder 158, Misc. notes #14 and #15, McWhorter Papers.
As S. G. Fisher tracked the Nez Perces through the Park, he kept in touch with the main command, recommending that Howard and his troops avoid the broken terrain and dense lodgepole pine forest east of Pelican Creek.

- O. O. Howard's military march
- Fisher's pursuit route
- Shively's escape route

Places and Events
1. Fisher's scout camp
2. Fisher discovered Nez Perce camp
3. Fisher met up with Irwin
4. Rough canyon where Nez Perces pushed horses through dense forest
5. Where Reddington caught up with Fisher
6. Fisher watched Indians move into the "trap"
where they fired on three couriers who had been sent by Colonel Sturgis. It is likely that this is the raiding party that alerted Joseph that the military blocked the Indians' route down the Yellowstone.19

Another group of scouts included Yellow Wolf, who later told McWhorter: "It was a few suns after the chiefs turned the white man and women [Emma Cowan and the Carpenters] loose that what I am telling you happened." At McCartney's Hotel in Mammoth, Yellow Wolf's raiders surprised Richard Dietrich, one of the Helena campers, and shot him down. The Indian who pulled the trigger shouted: "We are going to kill him now. I am a man! I am going to shoot him!" After the killing, Yellow Wolf and his friends skirmished with other whites, rounded up some horses, and headed back to the Nez Perces' camp on the Lamar River.20

In some accounts, the raiders who burned the Henderson ranch are linked to the Dietrich killing and also to the burning of Baronett's bridge on the Yellowstone. Historians have assumed that all of these raiding parties came from the same camp, were under the control of one or two chiefs, and had first crossed Baronett's bridge from the east before burning it when they re-crossed it from the west. In Yellow Wolf's case, his scouting was due as much to his own sense of purpose as to directives from warrior chiefs. As he told McWhorter, there were several scouting parties and "each party did scouting every sun." Whether the raiders used Baronett's bridge is also questionable. Under repeated questioning by historian McWhorter, Yellow Wolf insisted that he knew of no bridge across the Yellowstone.21

McWhorter: What way did warriors go to the bridge that was partly burned?

Yellow Wolf: There was no bridge that I know of but some of the Indians burned up some bedding and grube.

McWhorter: West or east side of Yellowstone River?

Yellow Wolf: We went over into Yellowstone River.22

If Yellow Wolf did not use Baronett’s bridge and had not heard of it, then how did he get from Mammoth Hot Springs to the Lamar River? And does his route tell us anything about the Indians’ strategy? Yellow Wolf’s answer to McWhorter’s question gives us a clue: He said he went into the river. The traditional crossing point on the Yellowstone, where the Bannock Trail intersects the river, is near present-day Tower Fall.23 Many of the Nez Perces knew the Bannock route, and if any of them had been with the young Yellow Wolf that day it is likely that they would have forded the river and followed the trail across Specimen Ridge and down to the Lamar.

When Yellow Wolf’s group—and likely the group that had burned Henderson’s ranch—returned to camp, they told Joseph that more whites and the army were thick down the Yellowstone. This information must have put Joseph, Looking Glass, and other chiefs in a quandary. They had rejected going to the Shoshone River, their prime route down the Yellowstone was blocked, and they wanted to avoid the white settlement at the Clark’s Fork mines, which lay to the northeast up Soda Butte Creek. Shively described the scene: "Here scouts were sent out, the Snake chief going to Baronette’s bridge, which he burned. Then they knew they were lost."24 Knowing that soldiers were on their trail and moving at them from at least two directions, Joseph and the other chiefs had only one option: travel directly through the Absarokas, up one of the streams running west from the divide. But which one was safest?

There are few clues about exactly where the Nez Perces were on the Lamar River when they realized their predicament. Shively told Mills that the Indians were about fifteen miles southeast of the Clark’s Fork mines, but that cannot be correct; the easternmost extremities of the Lamar drainage are south and west of the mines. Shively’s estimates of distance were also inaccurate. Fisher, Irwin, and J. W. Reddington, an experienced scout who tracked the Indians with Fisher for several days, were trained observers who drew maps of the area, fixed locations, and accurately estimated mileage. Their accounts provide the most reliable information about the location of the Nez Perces’ camp on the Lamar River.

Fisher began his pursuit of the Indians on September 1 from his camp below Yellowstone Lake. Following the Nez Perces’ trail up Pelican Creek, Fisher reported in his journal, he “met a white man suddenly. I instantly covered him with my gun and ordered him to advance . . . believing at the time that he belonged to the Enemy . . . he evaded an answer asking who I was.” The two men swapped

19. Brown, Flight of the Nez Perce, 329-334; Col. John Gibbon to Assistant Adj. Gen. Dept. of Dakota, October 18, 1877, in Report of the Secretary of War, 1877, 522; Scott, Memories of a Soldier, 61-63; Shively's account, New Northwest, September 14, 1877; Mary Allen Phinney, Jirah Secretary of War, 1877, 522; Scott, Memories of a Soldier, 61-63; Shively's estimates of distance were also inaccurate. Fisher, Irwin, and J. W. Reddington, an experienced scout who tracked the Indians with Fisher for several days, were trained observers who drew maps of the area, fixed locations, and accurately estimated mileage. Their accounts provide the most reliable information about the location of the Nez Perces’ camp on the Lamar River.

21. McWhorter, Yellow Wolf, 175-177. General Howard, in “Supplementary Report. Non-Treaty Nez Perce Campaign” (December 26, 1877), Report of the Secretary of War, 1877, 621, reported that his scouts brought him information that one group of raiders, "probably not more than ten in number," had burned a store, killed a citizen, fought with Doane's troops, and then recessed the Yellowstone and burned Baronett's bridge. To questions about the couriers fired on by raiders near Tower Fall, Yellow Wolf responded: "I don't know any thing about this question . . . I never heard of it." Brown, Flight of the Nez Perce, 331-333, repeated the stories of separate raiding parties without distinguishing between the groups.

22. McWhorter interrogations, Folder 158, #124, McWhorter Papers.
Baronett's bridge, which the Nez Perces burned during their flight in 1871, was built by Jack Baronett who would become one of the first assistant superintendents of Yellowstone National Park. The toll bridge was built to provide access to newly discovered mines at the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone.

questions warily for a few minutes before Fisher accepted his claim that "he was an escaped prisoner from Joseph's band." It was Irwin, the soldier who had been captured by the Indians a week earlier on the Firehole River. He had escaped with Shively's help and had backtrackered on the Indians' trail. Fisher pumped Irwin for information and then sent him back to Howard's headquarters before continuing into the wilderness on the Indians' track.25

"We made about six miles... we are now on the water of East Fork of Yellowstone... liveing on meat streight," Fisher wrote on September 2, two days after Joseph and Looking Glass had discussed their options in a council meeting. The next day Fisher pressed on into the dense lodgepole pine forest, where the Nez Perces had taken an incredible trail, pushing their livestock hard and funnelling down the few open passages in the timber. Fisher could not believe the trail and the Indians' determination:

September, Monday 3, 1877. Off on trail at daylight passed down the roughest canyon I was ever through dead and fallen timbr and rocks found plenty of dead crippled horses left by the enemy they evidently had a hard struggle to get through this place for the trees and logs was smeared with blood from their horses cut on the sharp stones & pine knots. . .

At this point, Fisher and his few remaining scouts came up quickly upon the Nez Perces' camp. 'We saw the Enemy's camp about 7 or 8 miles to the East of us on or near the Sumit of a high Mt," Fisher wrote on September 3, just as J. W. Reddington "brought us some Bacon & beans and letter from Command." Reddington found Fisher camped in a meadow on lower Mist Creek, not far from the Lamar River.26

24. New Northwest, September 14, 1877. In his report on the events in Yellowstone, Colonel Gibbon wrote that the Nez Perces traveled down the east bank of the Yellowstone "as far as Baronette's bridge, which they burnt, . . ." Report of the Secretary of War, 1877, 522.
26. Fisher Journal, p. 8. The published version of Fisher's Journal in Contributions does not include these passages, which pinpoint Fisher's location in the lower meadows of Mist Creek. Working from the published version, Daniel Goodenough assumed that Fisher was on Cold Creek, but in his unedited journal Fisher wrote: "We were several hours making down to the Main creek, one of the branches of East Fork." This must be Mist Creek, not Cold Creek, which Fisher would not have described as "the Main creek."
The mouth of the upper Lamar River is wide and inviting, with plenty of room on each side of the river to drive horses. Farther up the river, the canyon narrows but the river bottom remains wide and relatively clear of timber.

Fisher and Reddington climbed to the top of a ridge at dawn. As Reddington remembered it, "we looked right across a deep canyon and into hostile camp, and it struck us that they were putting up log breastworks to make a stand and give battle." The two men saw activity in the Nez Perces' camp, but it is more likely that the Indians were preparing to leave rather than digging in for a fight. The night before, Shively had escaped after he had showed the Indians a route to Crow country. It is clear that the Nez Perces were worried about how much the military knew about their location. Lean Elk had warned Shively after Irwin's escape: "I no care [about Irwin] but if you try to go I get heap mad." The Indians knew that they had to move quickly if they expected to elude the military. Their respite in Yellowstone National Park was about over.27

Fisher sketched a map of the Indians' camp and wrote to Howard, advising him to strike out for the Clark's Fork "by some other route" to intercept the Nez Perces, because he thought it "next to impossible for him [Howard] to move his Command over this trail." Sending Reddington back to Howard's command, Fisher left camp early on September 4 to keep watch on the Indians. After working his way through the thick timber, Fisher saw them gather their horses and pull down lodges about noon ... They are following up Canyon

27. J. W. Reddington to Lucullus V. McWhorter, November 1931, Folder 175, #167, McWhorter Papers; J. W. Reddington, "Scouting in Montana in the 1870s," typescript, John W. Reddington Papers, SC 683, MHSA; Shively's Account, New Northwest, September 14, 1877. Reddington wrote several articles about his years as a scout for Sunset Magazine, Pacific Monthly, and other publications. He was consistent in his telling of the Nez Perce story. See manuscript articles in John W. Reddington Papers, University of Washington Archives, Seattle.


29. This description is based on personal observations in the Lamar River area in 1983. The Yellowstone forest goes through a full cycle approximately every 100 years, so what we see in the mid-1980s is probably the kind of conditions the Nez Perces saw. Daniel Goodenough, in his 1973 article, assumed that the "trap" was Miller Creek, even though, as he noted, "Miller Creek is not, in fact a complete 'trap.'" He calls it a "trap," because "a party moving on horses would have no sensible route through the mountains except to follow the stream up and over Bootjack Gap." This is faulty reasoning, assuming beforehand that Bootjack Gap was their destination, an area that provided no reasonable camping area or place for 2,000 head of livestock. Goodenough, "Lost on Cold Creek," 26.
nearly East. They are now in what the Bannocks call the trap; they tell me that there is no way of getting out of it except at each end being about 15 miles through it. After dogging them along about 3 miles at 2 p.m. we heard rapid firing immediately below us in the Canyon about 100 shots fired. We left our horses and started down towards the firing but find a perpendicular wall between us and the row...  

Fisher’s description of the Nez Perces’ escape route—presumably the one that Shively had showed them—is the most important clue to the Indians’ track through the Absarokas. On a topographical map of Yellowstone National Park, Miller Creek and the upper Lamar River look like good candidates for the Bannock’s “trap”; both are long, deep canyons, with few or no exits. But when you look at the canyons on the ground, they are very different. Miller Creek is a steep and thickly forested canyon, matted with a tangle of fallen lodgepole pines, sometimes three logs deep. The upper Lamar is a deep slash in the volcanic mountainside, with precipitous cliffs and only two exits near the end of its canyon. Because of frequent run-off floods, the river has cut a wide swath as it drops to the canyon floor. Paved with river rock and free of timber, the upper Lamar opens like an inviting causeway and then quickly turns into a narrowing funnel as it climbs toward the Absaroka summit. This was the Nez Perces’ shortest and most direct route to the Clark’s Fork. Given the choice, it seems very unlikely that the Nez Perces would have passed by this “trap” for the logjam jumble of Miller Creek.  

There is other evidence that the upper Lamar is the “trap” and the principal route the Nez Perces took through the Absarokas. When recounting his scouting with Fisher, Reddington remembered searching for Shively:

No, we did not see Shively, but we saw his big tracks in the mud along the creek where he escaped. They looked as though he was wearing a no. 13 boot. We followed his trail some distance, and yelled frequently so that if he was hiding in the brush he would come out; but we got no response.  

Reddington had been with Fisher only a few hours, when they were “on the headwaters of the East Fork of the Yellowstone.” The only streams he could have inspected were the upper Lamar, Mist Creek, and Cold Creek.

Reddington left for Howard’s command on the morning of September 3, before Fisher saw the Nez Perces pack up their camp and before he continued down the Lamar River toward Soda Butte Creek. When Shively went to Lean Elk’s lodge on the night of September 2—“with his boots on” as he put it—and then escaped under a clear and dark sky, he “started south... then circled around north... and headed for Baronette’s bridge on the Yellowstone, forty miles away.” Shively guided himself by the “Soda Buttes and the North Star,” which he could see from the ridge. It is likely that Shively left the Nez Perces’ camp near present-day Little Saddle Mountain, crossed the Lamar River near its junction with the upper Lamar (where Reddington would have seen his footprint), and traveled on the ridge west of the river to Baronetti’s bridge.  

After he watched the Indians flee into the “trap,” Fisher returned to camp and waited for his scouts to return with information about the location of the fleeing Indians. The scouts had exchanged fire with the rearguard of the fleeing Indians—the shots that Fisher had heard echoing in the canyon below him. As Fisher recorded in his journal, his scouts told him that the Nez Perces had tried to negotiate, hollering to them:

we dont want to fight you for if you are Crows Bannocks or Snakes you are our friends let us talk and Smoke. but the boys knew their game too well and told them they would talk with their guns the boys stood them off until after dark left their extra animals and slid out cautiously.

This report left no doubt in Fisher’s mind that the Nez Perces were moving east to the Clark’s Fork. He spent September 5 in camp cleaning guns, writing reports for the command, and reflecting on his situation. “Am tired,” Fisher wrote in his journal, “of trying to get Soldiers & hostiles together. U.S. too slow for business.”  

On September 6, Fisher led his scouts down the Lamar about fifteen miles to Soda Butte Creek, where they followed the now fast-moving command to the Clark’s Fork. But on the way down the Lamar, the scouts again found “the enemys trail” at “a point where it [Lamar] formed a junction with another Stream betwixt the Stream we followed down and Soda Butte Creek. They [Nez Perces] then turned South of East following up this middle stream.”

30. Reddington to McWhorter, March 10, 1931, Folder 158, #93, McWhorter Papers. 
31. Reddington to McWhorter, November 1931, Folder 175, #167. When he was asked whether the Indians went up Miller Creek, Reddington replied: “I never heard of Miller Krick [Miller Creek was named in 1868], and know that the hostile’s main trail led up Pelican Krick, and on the northwest towards the head of East Fork.” Reddington to McWhorter, February 1935, Folder 175, #99. Reddington corrected McWhorter’s map, which had the Nez Perces traveling directly across the Mirror Plateau, Folder 175, #100, McWhorter Papers. 
32. New Northwest, September 14, 1877. Little Saddle Mountain is high enough to provide a clear view over the Absaroka divide to the Clark’s Fork of the Yellowstone, so it could be the peak from which Shively showed them [Indians] the open country about 20 miles off toward Crow country. 
34. Ibid. Using Fisher’s mileage estimates, it is clear that he was near the mouth of the upper Lamar River when he watched the Indians head east into the “trap.”
This description in Fisher's journal is confusing. How could he watch the Indians dive into the “trap” and then discover their trail again twelve miles down the Lamar? The answer to the riddle begins with the assumption that the Nez Perces traveled in one large group and that Joseph and Looking Glass camped together. There is no reason for this assumption and much evidence to the contrary. Yellow Wolf tells us that several scouting parties canvased both sides of the Yellowstone River and that they operated from different camps. And McWhorter's informants told him that Joseph was not lost but perhaps another group had become disoriented.

We know that Shively was with Lean Elk and Looking Glass and that the “Snake Chief” who had been sent to scout for soldiers had been the one to burn Baronett's bridge. What we do not know is whether the “Snake Chief” was with Looking Glass or Joseph. It is likely that Joseph, who had later insisted to Hugh Scott that he had wanted to travel down the Yellowstone, had moved down the Lamar to near Miller or Calfee creeks. This would have put the two main Nez Perce camps about eight to ten miles apart, with the livestock near the upper Lamar, the only place along the Lamar River with sufficient pasture for such a large herd. We also know from a newspaper correspondent that Howard's military scouts, who ascended the Lamar from Soda Butte Creek after Fisher had caught up with Howard's command, followed the Indians' trail to a washed-out basin, where the constant action of the elements has left pinnacles, towers and battlements of titanic structure [where]... we could in half a day bag the lot [Nez Perces] if we were strong enough. They now number nearly 200 lodges.

The correspondent was describing the Hoodoo Basin at the head of the upper Lamar, a place of exotic-looking rock formations and the logical exit from the “trap.” The Hoodoo Basin is also easily reached by ascending the Bannock Trail between Cache and Calfee creeks and traversing south along the Absaroka divide. So Joseph's and Looking Glass's bands could easily have rendezvoused in the area extending from Parker Peak to the Hoodoo Basin. There are also large parks in the area, which could have provided the livestock with ample grazing.

From the Hoodoo Basin area, the Nez Perces had several easy routes they could have taken to Cran dall Creek and the Clark's Fork River, where Fisher, prospector George Huston, and two of Howard's officers found the Nez Perces' trail on September 9. From Crandall Creek, the Indians went up Dead Indian Hill, drew Colonel Samuel Sturgis out of position, and dropped down to the mouth of the Clark's Fork Canyon and out toward the Yellowstone River. That deception and the subsequent fight at Canyon Creek against Sturgis's troops is another chapter in the story of the flight. From the Nez Perces’ exit from Yellowstone National Park in September to the horrific battle at Snake Creek in the Bears Paw Mountains one month later, the sequence of forced marches, skirmishes, and battle rushed the Indians headlong into a tragic history. What remains important in this story is the Nez Perces' respite in the Park.

There is no proof that the upper Lamar was the primary course taken by the Nez Perces, even though the preponderance of evidence, both in the documentary record and on the landscape, strongly suggests this route. It is an interesting finding, but if that were all that we could learn from the evidence this would be an only an engaging exercise. There is something of more substance here.

What the evidence indicates is that the Nez Perces were not lost in Yellowstone National Park. Several of the leaders, including Looking Glass and Lean Elk, had been on the Yellowstone River many times before and knew the region. While they made their way through the Park—especially after they had captured the tourists—the Indians kept scouts busy searching for the best routes and on the lookout for the military and more tourists. More importantly, the Nez Perces remained set on avoiding conflict, even though they could not always control young warriors who wanted to count coup or were bent on revenge for the Big Hole battle. They set the Carpenters free and did not pursue members of the Cowan party who had fled or Irwin after he had escaped. During their trek through the Park, they maintained no rear guard until Fisher's scouts pursued them as they fled into the “trap.”

The evidence also indicates that the Nez Perces made their strategic and tactical decisions in a council of leaders after discussing the alternatives. They made these decisions as they went, facing each situation and evaluating the inherent dangers. They made some serious mistakes, both before and after the battle at Canyon Creek.

35. In Flight of the Nez Perce (338-339), Brown noted Fisher's discovery of the "enemy's trail" but did not find the contradiction, conjuring that "it is highly probable that the Indians continued to follow the old Bannock Trail," which went over the divide at Canoe Lake. Aubrey Haines, The Yellowstone Story, 1:235-236, also mentioned Fisher's double discovery, but he put the Indians in both instances on the Bannock Trail, even though Fisher had traveled twelve miles between sightings.

36. McWhorter, Yellow Wolf, 177; McWhorter interrogations, Folder 158, #124.

37. Frank J. Parker in Idaho Weekly Statesman, September 29, 1877. Parker reported on the army's progress after they crossed the partially burned bridge. The dateline for this segment was September 9, 1877, in the Yellowstone wilderness.

38. New Northwest, September 14, 1877. Over the years, I have profited immensely from discussions with Stu Conner of Billings, Montana, about the terrain near the Clark's Fork and the Nez Perces' route down to Canyon Creek.
At the top of the Absaroka divide, where the two main Nez Perce groups may have joined up, there are several open park areas where the Indians' large herd could have grazed.

They were in Yellowstone, but there is little question that they succeeded in eluding the military and thoroughly frustrating their pursuers. While they were in the Park, they operated with limited knowledge of the military's positions and strategy and they made mistakes, but their errors were not due to ignorance about their location, confusion about the landscape, or fickleness in their goal. The Nez Perces wanted to stay in the Park. In other words, they decided to remain in the Park; they were not there because of disorientation or incompetence.

But this still does not answer the larger questions: why did the Nez Perces want to stay in the Park, and why did they stay so long? The few clues suggest some educated speculations. For one thing, the Nez Perces were tired and needed to rest. They had been under steady military pressure ever since they had entered Montana, and Yellowstone offered them a measure of relative safety. They also expected aid and sanctuary from the Crows, whose territory lay just beyond the mountains on the east edge of the Park. For another, the Nez Perces were hungry. They had kept moving after the Big Hole battle and had done little hunting. In Yellowstone it was different, as Lean Elk had told Shively: the Indians planned to stay in the Park for a few days, because the "elk were abundant and they were living off the fat of the land." Finally, they may have remained because the terrain and grasses looked disarmingly like their homeland in Idaho and Oregon.

Regardless of why they remained in the Park for thirteen days, it probably was the crucial difference between a late summer escape to Canada and the cold and snowy Snake Creek siege that brought their surrender in early October. Throughout their ordeal, the Nez Perces had pursued the same strategy: avoidance of conflict with whites and attainment of sanctuary. What they wanted was their true and just homeland and an end to harassment. Those days in the Park may have been the closest they came to their goals during their heroic flight.

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