

# "Hear Me My Chiefs" - Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce

By Toni Lee Robinson



<sup>1</sup> It was a time of joy. A baby had been born! The year was 1840. The new baby was the son of a Nimiipu (NEE Mee Poo) tribal leader. We know this tribe by the French name of Nez Perce (NEZ Purs). The baby's father was an elder of one band (branch) of the tribe. The lush Wallowa Valley in Oregon was their home.

<sup>2</sup> The boy was named Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt. (It means Thunder from the Mountain.) Later, the boy and his father were taught by white missionaries. The Nez Perce leader then took the name "Joseph," a Bible name. His son became known by this name, too.



<sup>3</sup> The young Joseph grew up. He learned the ways of his people. He became skilled at hunting game and fishing for salmon. He learned the old crafts—making knives, arrows, and other gear. He learned the story of The People, as the Nimiipu called themselves.

<sup>4</sup> The Nez Perce had long been at peace with white people. Their friendship had helped Lewis and Clark survive the harsh mountains. But whites were moving into Nez Perce lands. The U.S. government made treaties with the tribes. The treaties limited the natives to certain areas. The older Joseph would not agree to a treaty to limit tribal land. He and his band became known as "non-treaty Indians."

<sup>5</sup> As time passed, more white people came. U.S. agents visited the non-treaty tribes. The agents insisted that all tribes must stay on certain parcels of land, or reservations. One treaty said that the Wallowa Valley had been sold to the whites. Joseph had never agreed to the treaty. He refused to move his people from their beautiful valley. "No man owns any part of the earth," he said. "A man cannot sell what he does not own."

<sup>6</sup> The Nez Perce leader was growing old. He knew he wouldn't live much longer. He told his son to stand firm. The people must never agree to give up the land, Joseph instructed his son. The old leader died in 1871. The younger Joseph became leader of the band. He was determined to follow the wishes of his father.

<sup>7</sup> Finally, the U.S. sent soldiers to move the Nez Perce. The young native leader wanted peace. Above all, he didn't want his people killed. Chief Joseph gathered his

people. They began the move to the reservation. The young men of the band were angry. They wanted to fight the white men who were taking them from their homes.

<sup>8</sup> A group of young warriors broke away. They raided a white settlement. Several white people were killed. The U.S. army began to pursue the band. Whether he wanted it or not, Joseph found himself at war. He tried to warn his people of what was to come. He said:

<sup>9</sup> *"I have tried to save you from suffering and sorrow... We are few. They are many... They have food and ammunition in abundance. We must suffer great hardship and loss."*

<sup>10</sup> Joseph and his band kept moving. For hundreds of miles, they dodged the soldiers. At times, they turned and fought. Each time, they beat back their pursuers. They came to Montana, the land of the Crow tribe. Maybe there they could find help. But the Nez Perce found that their old friends had become enemies. Crow scouts were helping the army to hunt the Nez Perce down.

<sup>11</sup> The People wondered where they could turn next. It was fall in Montana. They had little food or supplies. Their children cried from the cold. Everyone was exhausted. Joseph decided to take his band across the border into Canada. The great Sioux chief Sitting Bull lived there with his people. The U.S. soldiers couldn't attack there.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph led his people north. He let them travel more slowly now. The soldiers, he knew, were tired, too. It would take them some time to catch up. But a new troop of soldiers had been sent. Just forty miles from the border, General Miles and his cavalry found the Nez Perce. Joseph and his band were surrounded.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph's warriors dug in and prepared to fight to the death. Miles sent two native men to speak with Chief Joseph. He offered peace. He promised to return Joseph and his people to their reservation in the spring. Joseph gazed at his people. Many were gone, killed by the soldiers or the cold. All the rest were hungry and very tired. Chief Joseph spoke.

<sup>14</sup> *"I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed... The old men are all dead... The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food... I want to have time to look for my children... 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 forever."*

<sup>15</sup> Chief Joseph and his band surrendered. In three months, the band of about 700 men women and children had come 1400 miles. Less than 200 warriors had held off 2000 U.S. troops in battle. The military skills of the small native band are studied by

soldiers to this day.

<sup>16</sup> In the end, it mattered little to the Nez Perce. The peace promises were broken. It was years before the band was taken to their reservation. Chief Joseph never again saw his beautiful home. He died in northern Washington in 1904. The problem, some said, was a broken heart.

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