

# The Nez Perce Trail Foundation

Wallowa Oregon

July 20, 2013

My work on the trail began about 1990 at the Root Feast. My uncle Joe Redthunder asked me to sit with him at the head drummer table during the meal services. I am not a drummer. He asked me if I had ever been to Joseph, Oregon. I said no and he proceeded to explain his work with the Nez Perce National Park and the Nez Perce Trail and the need for our people to get involved with the Park and Trail. He told me about the Chief Joseph Days Rodeo and parade and asked if I would ride with him in the parade representing our people. I agreed and have ridden in the parade a number of times and appreciate the respect the people of Joseph have shown us.

The Nez Perce National Historic Park was writing their general management plan for the trail expansion and asked the Colville, Nez Perce and Umatilla Tribes to participate. I was selected by the Joseph Band to represent the Tribe as well as several other Chief Joseph Band members. The park had several meetings on the expansion that we attended and then we joined a group of park staff that would be working on the park expansion and we took a two week trip to visit the new park sites. Frank Walker was Superintendent and it was a real pleasure to spend two weeks with Frank and members of the Park Staff. We visited the new park sites starting at Nespelem, and going to Wallowa, Oregon, Lapwai, Idaho, Wisdom, Montana, Chinook, Montana and ending the trip at Billings.

My first trip on the Lolo Trail was with Clear Water Forest staff and we spent a couple of days on the mountain road. Keith Thurlkill invited me to go with him and we met at Orofino and proceeded up the trail. I was surprised to discover that there was a road that ran the entire length of the trail. Sometimes over the trail but most times alongside but not far off the old trail. The land on the mountain ridges is quite fragile and great care must be taken to not disturb the ground. Actual trail tread can be seen and this valuable historic resource needs to be preserved. My first reaction was to close parts of the road so that people could not deplete the trail tread.

Keith invited me to go to a National Historic Trail meeting in Florida. It was a great opportunity to meet other trail advocates and to meet Garry Warner, executive director of the partnership for the national trails. I traveled with Keith to a national trail meeting at Lake Tahoe, which was significant as it was at this meeting Keith approached me to approach the Foundation board to contract work on the Trail. At this time Keith was in charge of all the trails administered by the US Forest service, Missoula, Montana and on the Nez Perce he had a part time assistant Dan Gard. Dan handled most of the administrative details leaving Keith to do the broad general management work of coordinating the work with the many forests the trail traverses. Working with Mary H. Williams, of the Bitterroot National Forest they arranged for installation of the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) Trail signs along or near the Highways in Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming and

Montana. Keith had coordinating meetings along the trail inviting local people, forest service staff and tribal representatives. We met with Yellowstone Park staff at Gardner, Montana to discuss the trail as it approaches the park from West Glacier and through the park. The Park is quite unique in that it was a park at the time of the Nez Perce War but more important the Nez Perce, along with other Tribes had a strong presence in the area. The area was identified by our people as the land of boiling mud.

The Forest Service sponsored a Symposium at Lewiston, Idaho. The Symposium was important as it provided an opportunity to meet in the heart of the Nez Perce people. It was well attended by the various Nez Perce groups and we had a significant presence there to present our views on the Trail. We met with Joe Helm who represented the Wallowa homeland project and he described their work and asked for our support for their Nez Perce homeland project. We gave strong support for their effort to make a place available for the Nez Perce to stay and conduct their ceremonies.

The Lewiston Symposium offered an opportunity for the foundation to have an annual meeting and election of board members and officers. Heretofore the foundation was operated by the Forest Service with staff serving as officers of the organization. It was their plan to transfer operation of the Foundation to private citizens, and to make it a truly non-profit with all the benefits of a 501c. The Foundation was developed by a group of interested trail supporters led by the late Merle Wells of the Idaho Historic Society. Steve Russell, from Ames Iowa was elected President, I was elected Vice-President and Sandi McFarland and Dan Gard were secretary and treasurer. From that beginning we have had annual meeting and election of officers representing the three tribes, and several non members. We held all our meeting along the trail attended by between 15 to 30 members. We usually had a key note speaker and in most cases a noted author of the war or Chief Joseph.

Sand McFarland was selected as the first Nez Perce Trail Administrator in 2001. She was allowed to work out of Orofino, ID. She is on the staff of the Forest Service in Missoula, MT. and reported to the Deputy Regional Forester. Jim Evans was hired in 2003 as Executive Director for the Foundation. The Foundation has a cost share agreement with the Forest Service to provide services and to do projects along the trail. We are able to do projects at a large savings as most of the work is done by volunteers. Our primary guide is the comprehensive management plan which was completed in the late 1980's and is currently under revision. The Forest Service holds annual meetings with their partners to set priorities for the current project year.

The most significant event along the trail was the Lewis and Clark centennial which occurred in 2004 and 2005. To highlight this event a lot of trail work was done on the Lolo Trail in anticipation of the 10,000 visitors expected to walk the trail. However, they never came as they seemed to prefer the meeting in the towns along the trail. The Forest Service built a visitors center at Great Falls, which highlights the various tribes that lived along the Lewis & Clark Trail. Through the cooperation of the States of Idaho and Montana a visitors center was built on the Lolo pass. The Lewis & Clark expedition used

the old Nez Perce Trail to cross over the Bitterroot mountains and there is a balanced display of the two trails and the Nez Perce people.

The Nez Perce National Park plays a large part in interpreting the history of the Nez Perce People at Spalding, Id., the Battle of the Big Hole, and the final battle at the Bear Paw Battlefield. Little was said of what happened to the Nez Perce after the final battle at Bear Paw and the foundation took on the task of extending the Trail to Ft. Leavenworth, Oklahoma and their return to the Northwest. To commemorate these places signs telling the story of the Nez Perce people were placed at Ft. Leavenworth, KS, Baxter Springs, KS, Quapaw, OK, and Tonkawa, OK. From the Bear Paw Battlefield a group of the Nez Perce, under the leadership of White Bird fled to Canada before Chief Joseph surrendered his rifle to Colonel Miles. The Forest Service is unable to spend money in Canada and we are unable to properly mark the route of the people who fled to Canada. A number of the people returned to the various reservations in the states but a number of them settled and continue to live in Canada.

The Nez Perce Trail covers about 1200 miles, goes through 4 states and many communities along the route. We have recognized that if we are to be effective than we need to include these communities in our work along the Trail. The Wallowa coalition is one of the most active organizations. The Chinook Museum is also very active in promoting the Bear Paw Battlefield. Unlike the scenic and hiking trails where people from large cities want to get on the trail to hike and get away from the day to day work our trail is rural and the local people have a number of options to explore the great outdoors. As a result the number of people who walk or ride the trail is very low and I doubt if we can increase the usage.

That said than how do we preserve and promote the trail. Sandi puts out an annual calendar which is well received, and she has a traveling trunk and they update their tour routes and maps. There are videos of the trail and we just completed a virtual tour map which will put you on the trail without leaving your house. We look forward with interest as the revised comprehensive management plan is finalized.