

Lands of Conflict and History



Bear Paw Battlefield, Where Chief Joseph Surrendered,
Montana, 2008 by Sue Reynolds

Discussion and Writing Questions

Note: Older students can be assigned to research the Nez Perce War in advance to further discussion, including the full text of Chief Joseph’s surrender statement at Bear Paw Battlefield.

1. Discuss what happened at the Bear Paw Battlefield in Montana where Chief Joseph surrendered.
2. What do you think about Chief Joseph’s surrender statement?
3. How do you feel about what happened to the Nez Perce?

Reservation lands and areas near them represent important places of American Indian conflicts and history.

Located 15 miles south of Chinook, Montana, the Bear Paw Battlefield commemorates the final battle of the Nez Perce War of 1877. Led by Chief Joseph, over 700 Nez Perce – part of the Nez Perce tribe – refused to leave their lush Wallowa Valley in northeastern Oregon to live on a reservation in Idaho with unsuitable land.

With the U.S. Army advancing to force their relocation, these Nez Perce tried to flee to safety in Canada. In June, the Army began pursuing them for 1,200 miles before a war broke out in October. Just 40 miles from the Canadian border, the Nez Perce were confronted by the Army, which erupted into a five-day battle and siege. While some Nez Perce found refuge in Canada, Chief Joseph saw that his remaining people were freezing and starving. He surrendered to the Army with these words:

“I am tired of fighting...My people, some of them have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food...My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.”

The surviving Nez Perce were moved to a reservation in Idaho, where today some descendants of Chief Joseph’s band still live. Others are scattered in various locations, including Washington, Oklahoma and Canada.

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Prairie and Ranches From Bear Butte, Black Hills of South Dakota, 2009 by Sue Reynolds

Bear Butte is sacred to many tribes in the region and a portion is reserved for traditional ceremonies. All of western South Dakota, including the Black Hills, and parts of Nebraska, North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana were part of the Great Sioux Reservation and "Unceded Indian Lands," established by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. After George Armstrong Custer discovered gold in the Black Hills, the U.S. Government violated the 1868 treaty by passing an Act in 1877 which took away the sacred Black Hills from the Great Sioux Reservation. New Federal laws in the 1880s took away more land, relocating Lakota people to five smaller reservations and leaving them with greatly reduced land areas.

Discussion and Writing Questions

1. What is a treaty?
2. Who might enter into a treaty?
3. What happened to many of the treaties that the United States government signed with American Indians?
4. Why were treaties with American Indians broken?
5. What do you think about this?

Note: Older students can research and document the story of Native Americans and reservations today. A good starting point would be the reservation and tribes living on it nearest their school, then in their state, and finally, nationwide. How many Native Americans live on versus off the reservation nearest them? In their state? Nationwide? How many reservations are there in their state? In the United States? How many states have reservations? Which state has the most reservations?

Older students can also create a timeline of key dates in Native American history relative to their own location or nationwide. Starting points could be 1492, The Trail of Tears: 1831 - 1850, a series of forced removals of American Indians from their homelands. Timelines could conclude with the date American Indians became citizens of the United States, or continue to include contemporary events such as the Dakota Access Pipeline controversy.

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Other Sections Inside this Chapter:

Mother Earth Introduction
Finding Spirit
Artist's Statement
Poet's Statement
Interpretation Strategies

Additional Chapters:

Reservation Life
Reclaiming Culture Introduction

Other Resources

Still Here: Not Living in Tipis, by Sue Reynolds and Victor Charlo.

"*People of the Horse.*" National Geographic, March 2014.

"Announcements." *Native American Rights Fund*, Winter, 1979.