**RICH WANDSCHNEIDER: NIMIIPUU RETURN TO THE WALLOWA**

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**INTRO:** WELCOME TO VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH — A PODCAST SERIES FROM THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER. I’M JANE FRITZ.

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE NEZ PERCE, OR NIMI’IPUU, IN 1989 WHEN I WALKED THROUGH THE DOORS OF THE UNIQUE, TRIANGULAR SHAPED BUILDING OF THE NEZ PERCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK NEAR LAPWAI, IDAHO. THEIR STORY WAS MY INTRODUCTION TO IDAHO’S NATIVE PEOPLES AND FOR THE NEXT 13 YEARS, I WORKED ON CULTURAL PROJECTS WITH THE LAPWAI TRIBE, INCLUDING PRODUCING FEATURES AND DOCUMENTARIES FOR PUBLIC RADIO.

IN 2020, I RETURNED TO THE WALLOWA COUNTRY IN NORTHEAST OREGON AFTER A 23-YEAR ABSENCE. BUT UNLIKE BEFORE, A STRONG NEZ PERCE PRESENCE NOW EXISTED THERE: A TRIBAL FISHERIES OFFICE, THE WALLOWA HOMELAND VISITOR CENTER, LONGHOUSE AND TAMKALIKS PROPERTY, AND THE JOSEPHY CENTER FOR ARTS AND CULTURE. IT WAS AT THE THE JOSEPHY WHERE I MET ITS REMARKABLE AND KNOWLEDGEABLE LIBRARY DIRECTOR, RICH WANDSCHNEIDER. LET’S HAVE RICH TELL US HIS AND THE NIMI’IPUU STORY.

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**RICH:** I am not Nez Perce, not Nimiipuu, not even Native American. My families got here from Norway and Germany in the 1880s and 90s, a time when the settler country was done with its Indian Wars and intent on making Indians civilized and more like them—white.

I grew up in America in the 1940s and 50s, a half century after those futile efforts, and came to the Wallowa Country in Eastern Oregon in 1971, less than a century after the Nez Perce War of 1877. This country had been the ancestral home to Chief Joseph and the Wallowa Band of the Nez Perce Indians. Joseph’s tragic last visit here was in 1900. I eventually met Ben Weathers, who would have been here to shake Joseph’s hand as he was spurned by the citizens. Over 200 locals circulated a petition, saying that the good white citizens did not want any lazy Indians in “their” country. And the newspaper wrote that the locals “made sport of the old chief.”

Historically, white men wrote petitions and newspaper articles and letters to the government; Indians didn’t record the colonizer’s actions nor their own troubles in writing.

But Indians write now. They go to law school and forestry school, have their own newspapers and radio stations. Some old white men—and scholars of every color, ethnicity, and gender—are examining the past with a more critical eye. Sometimes, as the Methodists have done here in the Wallowa, returning land, and as Pope Francis recently did in Canada, apologizing for past sins.

And the Nez Perce are returning to the Wallowa. Who are they? Why and how did they leave? And what does their return look like? Let’s begin with a brief history.

The Nez Perce were one of several Indigenous Nations in what we now call the Inland Northwest. They—and their Umatilla, Walla Walla, Cayuse, Yakama, and Palus relatives— spoke Sahaptian dialects. They traveled extensively by foot and canoe, moving up and down with the seasons, hunkering in river canyons in family groups in winter, moving to higher ground in spring in larger numbers—called bands, that were often denoted by geography, or by a leader’s name. Archeologists have found evidence of human habitation on the Salmon River in the region that dates to more than 16,000 years.

The band of Nez Perce that lived in the Wallowa was called walwa ma—people of the Wallowa. Although Chief Young Joseph, in his famous 1879 speech in Washington D.C. said that he was of the wele mutkin band of the cu pnit pelu, or Nez Perces. Wele mutkin would have been his grandfather, the father of Old Joseph, Tuekekas, who is now reburied at the foot of Wallowa Lake. There might have been 200-500 Nimi’ipuu living in this entire Wallowa Country, depending on the year and the weather, and how many were in Montana hunting buffalo.

They met the white colonists’ horses before they met the people, about 1730. The horses probably came from feral horses in the Southwest, that got to the Plateau tribes from the Shoshone. The second dramatic encounter with whites was with their diseases. In the 1790s regional tribes were devastated by diseases coming from the coast and up the Columbia River, and at the same time along the fur trade route to their north. It was about that time that French fur traders named the Nimiipuu the “Nez Perce”—pierced noses. And shortly after that, in 1805, that the Nez Perce saved Lewis and Clark from starvation. But as Nez Perce elder and historian, Allen Pinkham, Sr., explains, without immunity the white man’s diseases had already taken a toll.

**ALLEN PINKHAM:** Nez Perce numbered between 6 and 7,000 and that was in 1805. By 1900 our numbers were only 1300 Nez Perce. But even prior to Lewis and Clark, we had also suffered at least two epidemics that wiped out whole villages along the Salmon, the Snake and the Clearwater. We lost thousands of our tribal people to diseases.

**RICH:** Other than the Corps of Discovery, the explorer Captain Bonneville, and the occasional fur trader, the first white men that came to the Nez Perce were missionaries. In 1836, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and Henry and Eliza Spalding arrived among the Cayuse and the Nez Perce. Whitman converted almost no Cayuse, and died at the hand of Natives upset that his doctoring had not helped them with measles. Eliza Spalding learned the Nez Perce language, and her husband converted many Indians, including Tuekekas, who took the name Joseph. He was later known by whites as Old Joseph.

Whitman, unsuccessful at converting Cayuse, recruited settlers, and the wagon trains began rolling in in 1843. The Wallowa Country was off the trail, but enough Northwest settlers had arrived to encourage Washington governor, Indian Agent, and railroad surveyor Isaac Stevens to call a big treaty council in Walla Walla in 1855. His intent was to contain all the inland tribes on just two reservations. When over 2000 Nez Perce arrived on horseback at the treaty grounds, plans changed. The Nez Perce got their own reservation—reserving 7.5 million acres of their traditional lands along the Snake and Salmon rivers and smaller tributaries.

Gold was discovered in Idaho in 1860, and a year later there were 15,000 white miners living on reservation lands—illegally. In 1863, the U.S. government called for a new treaty, reducing the reservation by 90 percent and dividing the Nez Perce Nation into those who signed—the “Treaty bands”—and those who did not, the non-treaty bands. Old Joseph would not sign, threw away his Bible, and came back to the Wallowa to live. When he passed in 1871, the first white settlers were coming into the Wallowa. His son, Hinmatóowyalahtq'it, or Young Joseph, became the band’s leader. *He* would face the intrusion.

Settlers kept coming, and in 1877, Joseph was given 30 days to get his people out of the Wallowa. Forced out during spring flood, with women, children and old people and hundreds of cows and horses, they crossed the Snake River at Dug Bar without losing a Native soul. They intended to move to the reduced reservation at Lapwai, Idaho, but a few angry young Natives killed some white Idaho settlers in revenge, and a five-month-long, 1200-mile fighting retreat was on. The 1877 Nez Perce War had commenced.

The Nez Perce were brilliant, but, even after evading four American armies, they were pinned down in the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana, 40 miles shy of Canada. Some escaped across the border, but Joseph and most of the Nimiipuu rode, and were boated and railroaded to Bismarck, North Dakota and then to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. They were eventually moved to Indian Territory in Oklahoma, to what the descendants still refer to as the “hot place.”

After eight years and two trips by Joseph to Washington D.C. where he pleaded for his people’s return to the West, about 300 remaining Nez Perce were allowed that return—but not to Oregon. Nor could Joseph and his close followers go to Lapwai in Idaho. Returnees were divided, with about half going to Lapwai, and the walwa ma band sent to the Colville Reservation in Washington, where Joseph’s boyhood friend, Chief Moses, took them in.

The walwa ma still remain in exile on the Colville Reservation, 145 years after they were forced from their homeland. Elder Veronica Redstar says they would travel by bus to see their Nimi’ipuu relatives on the Umatilla Reservation in Oregon, or on the Nez Perce Reservation in Lapwai, Idaho. It was always a painful reunion for her grandmother.

**VERONICA REDSTAR:** One of the things that would happen…When we get there, we go into the home and my aunts or whoever would have greeted us, they’d go up to my katsa and start weeping. They would cry. And I never understood why they did that….Later on, our mother shared with us: it’s because we are all separated as a people. We’re all split apart and we can’t see each other every day. So when you go visit them, they miss each other; they miss each other dearly.

**RICH:** But along with their kin from Umatilla in Oregon and those in Idaho, Joseph’s people on the Colville Reservation are finding their way back to the Wallowa.

Listen next time for the story of their determined return. For the Idaho Mythweaver’s Voices of the Wild Earth, I’m Rich Wandschneider in Joseph, Oregon.

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**VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH** PODCASTS ARE PRODUCED BY ME, JANE FRITZ, AND ASSOCIATE PRODUCER, JUSTIN LANTRIP, FOR THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER. SPECIAL THANKS TO WRITER AND PRODUCER RICH WANDSCHNEIDER OF THE JOSEPHY CENTER FOR ARTS AND CULTURE, AND BOB WEBB OF ENTERPRISE, OREGON FOR HIS ENGINEERING ASSISTANCE.

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