

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat and the Banishment of the Nez Perce Tribe

By Brandon Hallmark

When Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat (commonly referred to in American History as “Chief Joseph”) was born to the Wallowa band of Nez Perce Native American Tribe, his people roamed a territory consisting of large swaths of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. By the time he died, the vast Nez Perce tribe had been forcibly concentrated to a land less than a tenth of their home territory and his Wallowa band had been banished from Nez Perce territory entirely – a galling consequence of promises reneged, treaties of bad faith, and violence by and on behalf of the US government.

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat was born near Wallowa Lake in northeastern Oregon, part of the semi-arid region of the Pacific Northwest east of the Cascade Mountains. His father was Chief of the Wallowa band of the Nez Perce Native American Tribe, who had become friendly with white missionaries in modern day Idaho. His father was baptized by these missionaries and took the baptism name “Joseph.” Because of his father’s baptism name, his father is commonly referred to as “Old Chief Joseph” and Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat is commonly referred to as “Young Chief Joseph” in written historical records.

The 1840s were a turbulent time in the Pacific Northwest. As the Oregon Trail became increasingly popular, white American settlers encroached more and more on Native American nomadic territories. And while Native American tribes typically were welcoming and curious of white settlers early in the migration period, they eventually became wary of white settlers as more demands were made on Native American lands. Tensions – oft brought on by fear, misunderstanding, and cultural differences – broke to violence on reoccurring occasion.

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat’s father followed a similar pattern: Initially welcoming and curious, he became frustrated by white American settlers’ demands and actions as they appropriated traditional Native American lands in his band’s region for farming and livestock. Against this backdrop, the Washington Territory governor called for a council in what is now Walla Walla, Washington to designate separate settler and Native American lands. Old Chief Joseph and the other Nez Perce chiefs, together with the US government, signed the Treaty of Walla Walla, which established a 7,700,000 acre territory for Native Americans across modern Oregon, Washington and Idaho. These lands largely preserved the territorial integrity of the Wallowa band’s traditional lands.

Within months it became obvious that the treaty would be ignored by the settlers. White American settlers and miners kept coming into the established Walla Walla treaty lands. A gold rush in Eastern Oregon caused the US government to decide on a “change in policy” and – in blatant violation of the Walla Walla Treaty – the federal government demanded in 1863 that the tribes settle on land in Idaho (far away from the Wallowa Valley) that was **less than a tenth** the size of the already agreed-upon territory. The United States’ representatives created the false narrative that the Nez Perce wanted to settle down and become farmers. Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat (now in his early 20s), served as an official observer – and was particularly appalled by the US representatives’ assertions, as he (and his people) remained passionately committed to his people’s nomadic lifestyle.

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat’s father and four other Nez Perce chiefs refused to sign the 1863 treaty, creating a rift among the Nez Perce with those who did sign. The Wallowa band returned to their territory, as defined by the Walla Walla Treaty. By 1871, Old Chief Joseph’s health was failing. He gave his son some advice:

Always remember that your father never sold his country. You must stop your ears whenever you are asked to sign a treaty selling your home. A few years more and white men will be all around you. They have their eyes on this land. My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father’s body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother.

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat clasped his father's hand and promised to protect their lands, for "a man who would not defend his father's grave is worse than a wild beast." Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat succeeded his father as Chief.

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat (then in his early thirties) was by all accounts handsome, charismatic, and respected. Despite his father's warning, he urged peace and sought peaceful coexistence and agreement with the US government. Even in the face of provocations by white settlers and prospectors, Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat would not allow the Wallowa band to resort to violence. They escorted trespassers off their land, but left them unharmed. In 1873, Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat negotiated with the US federal government to ensure his people could stay in the Wallowa Valley.

But, within four years US Army General Oliver Howard made plain that those promises would be broken. He ordered the Wallowa band to the Nez Perce reservation in Idaho. When Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat spoke of equality of men (in disbelief that "the Great Spirit Chief gave one kind of men the right to tell another kind of men what they must do"), General Howard reacted angrily. When another Nez Perce chief protested – Howard had that man jailed. Howard toured the reservation with the remaining chiefs (though they protested the lack of suitable land) and declared the bands had 30 days to comply with his demand that they move to the reservation.

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat met with the other chiefs in Rocky Canyon, Idaho. While the other chiefs advocated for war, Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat counseled for peace – preferring to abandon his father's bones rather than to bring the calamity of war upon his people. But then the news arrived that young Nez Perce men had killed four white settlers in retaliation for the white settlers' murder of the Nez Perce men's parents.

In response, Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat joined the other chiefs in fleeing from Idaho. Though the other chiefs were better warriors, Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat managed the logistics of the flight. The Nez Perce first fled to seek the aid of the Crow Tribes in Montana (who refused), then to the Lakota Tribes in Canada. All the while, the Nez Perce deftly evaded the US Army forces. When the Army's cavalry companies caught up to the Nez Perce, they were repelled with heavy casualties on the Army's part. When Army General Nelson A. Miles attacked the Nez Perce in the Bears Paw Mountains of Idaho, the result was a stalemate that was made into a formal truce. General Miles broke the truce and captured Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat – but then had to trade Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat for one of Miles officers who was captured after Miles broke the truce.

Even General Howard was impressed by the Nez Perce, though he would eventually overcome them given the guns and weaponry of the US Army. Howard arrived at the Bears Paw Mountains and sieged the Nez Perce for days. The siege and skirmishes took their intended toll: Major Nez Perce war leaders died, and the freezing weather with no food or blankets shook the Nez Perce into surrender. Five of Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat's own children died during the siege.

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat gave the Nez Perce's formal surrender on October 5, 1877. He is purported to give what is thought to be one of the greatest speeches in American history:

I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed; [War Chief] Looking Glass is dead, [War Chief] Too-hul-hul-sote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led on the young men is dead. It is cold, and we have no blankets; the little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children, to see how many I can find. 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.

It is unclear if Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat actually said these exact words, but the transcript of the speech by "Chief Joseph" made national news in the United States. Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat negotiated with Miles and Howard for a safe return home for his people, but General William Sherman (he of "make Georgia howl" fame in the US Civil War), overruled this decision. Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat and 400 followers instead were forced onto unheated rail cars and taken to Fort Leavenworth, in far-away Kansas, as prisoners of war. They were later transferred to Oklahoma. Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat's people lived there for seven years, where a vast number of them died of epidemic diseases.

In 1879, Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat met with US President Rutherford B. Hayes and pled for his people's return to their home. Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat was a respected spokesperson, but strong opposition in Idaho by those who had settled on the Native lands resulted in the denial of his petition. Nearly a decade later, Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat and his followers were granted permission to return to the Pacific Northwest to settle on the reservation around Kooskia, Idaho. But even this promise was a lie: Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat's people were

instead taken to the Colville Indian Reservation in Nespelem, Washington – removed from both their ancestral lands and from the rest of the Nez Perce people.

Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat never stopped advocating for his people. He famously rode in a parade with Buffalo Bill in New York City (the media largely ignored his cause), and later met with President Teddy Roosevelt.

But the return of his people to their homeland never happened. Still in exile, Hinmuuttu-Yalatlat died on September 21, 1904, of what his doctor described as "a broken heart."