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By Martin Stadius



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"A remarkable personal quest. Martin Stadius sets off to truly tell the story of the Nez Perce, the Real People. He follows the trail through the archives and over every mile of their odyssey, a journey both exhilarating and heartbreaking. This is blue-highways, tramp-the-weeds history at its best." Elliott West, Professor of Native American Studies, Univ. of Arkansas  
(Elliott West)

"Martin Stadius gives the reader a vivid account of the feelings he got while traveling the rugged 1,200 mile retreat route taken by Chief Joseph and his people over terrain which remains little changed today. For anyone interested in the incredible saga of the flight toward freedom by the courageous Nez Perce, this is a "must-read" book." Bill Gulick, author of *Chief Joseph Country*  
(Bill Gulick)

"Stadius' writing style is arresting, as he splices together historical events with his travels along the Nez Perce National Historic Trail. . . Dreamers is an important book, if only to help us understand another part of the Pacific Northwest's history. Though studius and research-filled, Dreamers does not read like a dry, dusty textbook. Instead it brings alive an important and tragic chapter of our region's past." *Tri-City Herald*  
(*Tri-City Herald*) --Tri-City Herald

#### About the Author

Martin Stadius is a native of the West with more than twenty years experience in the book business and lives in Portland, Oregon. He began his study of the Nez Perce war in 1992, after reading about the new National Historic Trail, and visiting White Bird, where the first battle of the conflict was fought.

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DREAMERS: On the Trail of the Nez Perce by Martin Stadius

#### PROLOGUE

A few minutes after ten on a blustery and overcast June morning, I was late. My 1972 Volkswagon Westfalia struggled in third gear toward the summit of White Bird Hill on U.S. Highway 95 in central Idaho. I kept company with the eighteen-wheelers in the slow lane, practicing the patience learned by all drivers of geriatric VW vans. Passing through a cut at the top of the divide, we began the long glide down White Bird Canyon toward its juncture with the Salmon River eight miles to the south. The trucks continued to crawl from the pass as slowly as we ascended, their drivers heeding the strident warning signs about the steep descent, but I slid my van into the passing lane and slipped it into fourth gear, drifting down through one sweeping curve after another.

The pavement gripped the west canyon wall as a dramatic vista unfolded two thousand feet below. The slope from the highway fell precipitously to a sere canyon floor several miles wide, there a jumble of bare ridges and ravines, knolls and swales. White Bird Creek snaked through the dun expanse, a slender braid of green falling from its source somewhere in the mountains. Beyond the creek the far canyon wall ramped steadily upward to a distant tree line where turbulent clouds glided across the horizon. After several miles I spotted an overlook on the other side of the highway where a crowd of sixty or so had gathered. Braking hard, I

managed to cut my van across the oncoming traffic. As the van lurched to a halt in the parking lot, my foot slipped off the clutch. The engine rattled noisily then stalled, and people turned to stare curiously. Graceful, Martin.

I got out with my camera and stood near the railing at the back edge of the scattered audience. Scheduled for ten o'clock, the ceremony had not yet begun, so I took in the view of the canyon floor now only six hundred feet below. The opening battle of the Nez Perce War of 1877 had flared amid the contorted terrain on the near side of the canyon bottom. I struggled to imagine what it must have been like that June morning: the thin line of about one hundred cavalry and civilian volunteers stretched along a ridge line, two waves of warriors advancing led by three men wearing red blankets to draw the soldiers' fire. Seventy years of peace between the Nez Perce and whites, seventy years since Lewis and Clark had first stumbled into the homeland of the Nez Perce, disappearing in a tumult of gunsmoke and dust and shouts.

So you're from Oregon, a voice said over my shoulder. I turned to find a man probably in his fifties, fit and tall with a graying beard and thick glasses. He nodded toward the license plates on my van, and I confessed I was from Portland. He asked if I was on vacation.

Well, sort of. I'd quit my job in the spring, just before I turned forty, sold most of my household goods and put the rest in storage. I had a few dollars socked away and had been pretty much bumming around ever since, camping wherever it fit my fancy, fishing here and there on some smaller streams not overrun with anglers, hanging out in small-town saloons and lying about my fishing prowess to folks who knew yarns when they heard them and responded with some of their own, poking around little museums and historical sites, reading. The good life. I'd heard about this event last evening at the Nez Perce National Historical Park headquarters, had been headed this way eventually and just stepped on the gas a little.

His name was Denis. A farmer, he told me he was related to one of the civilian volunteers who fought beside the two companies of cavalry in the canyon below. Severely wounded in the hip during the battle, the volunteer, Theodore Swarts, eventually homesteaded on part of the battlefield. Denis pointed out to me some trees and the swampy remnant of a pond from those homestead years. I could sense the pride in his voice and perhaps a bit of nostalgia or envy.

A Nez Perce tribal leader dressed in sport coat and slacks, his white shirt open at the collar, stepped to a podium near the overlook shelter and offered a prayer in his native language. A three-man color guard passed by, U.S., Idaho and VFW flags rippling. A stocky Nez Perce wearing sunglasses and a National Park Service uniform spoke next. His long braided hair was draped over massive shoulders and framed glasses and a gentle face. His voice was calm, melodious, but the portable public address system fought a losing battle with the wind, the roar of passing trucks and the expanse of the canyon. I heard only snippets of his speech: . . . this is not a celebration . . . first battle . . . long struggle . . . women and children . . . could have been avoided. Applause floated away in gusts of wind, and a white man approached the podium, again in the gray and green National Park Service uniform. Still, snatches of words only: . . . first in many . . . National Historical Park . . . plans for the future . . . thank the Nez Perce Tribe without whose help . . .

A minivan with Utah license plates pulled up behind me and out poured parents, four kids and--I guessed-- a grandparent. They formed a knot to my right and a hushed conversation ensued. The youngest of the boys asked what was happening. Listen and maybe you'll find out, the mother said. It's the anniversary of the Battle of White Bird Canyon, I offered. Getting blank stares in return, I added, the Nez Perce War of 1877. At that the father nodded. The one Chief Joseph fought, he explained to his kids. The youngest boy asked who won. The battle? The Nez Perce, I said, but they lost the war. Another of the boys made a gunshot sound, clutched his chest and began what promised to be a protracted death spiral until the mother grabbed his jacket and whispered, stop that!

The Nez Perce lost the war, of course, like all the native tribes eventually lost their wars. After this first battle the younger warriors were full of pepper. They had licked one batch of soldiers, bring on the rest. The older men and women knew better, though, remembered the late 1850s when war raged on the fringe of the Nez Perce homeland and American armies whipped the Yakamas, the Palouse, the Walla-Wallas, the Spokanes, one defiant tribe after another, remembered the 1840s after the Whitman massacre when the Cayuse were hounded relentlessly into submission and near-extinction. So, for almost a month after the battle here at White Bird the Nez Perce evaded the ever-growing army, units ordered from Arizona, Nevada, California, Alaska, Oregon and Washington, from as far away as Georgia. Then came the battle at Clearwater about forty miles north, the wrenching decision to flee their homeland, the trek across the Lolo Trail to supposed safety in Montana. To the Big Hole, where another army jumped them and the Nez Perce buried eighty dead, mostly women and children. Escaping that place grieving and enraged, they dodged south and east through the newly-designated Yellowstone National Park, leaving a wake of terrified tourists, toward the plains of central Montana, the buffalo country, where the reformed Seventh Cavalry waited, eager to kick some Indian butt as revenge for Custer's death the year before. Not this time, not these Nez Perce. They stormed north toward Canada and sanctuary until, finally, only forty miles from the border the final army caught them and Chief Joseph uttered the words that would enshrine him in memory: from where the sun then stood he would fight no more, forever.

The tribal leader returned to the microphone. He spoke passionately and in a stronger voice, but not much about the events of 1877. Instead, he mentioned the women today who held the families together through hard times, the destruction caused by alcohol and drugs, the need to protect the children, the responsibility of grandparents and parents and all adults to help the young learn how to live a good life. The women and the children, he concluded, were the reason the men fought the war over a hundred years ago, and quietly the struggle continued. A child in bright, traditional regalia wandered around the podium during the speech, and several times the speaker paused to pat the boy's shoulder. The elder offered a closing prayer in Nez Perce, and the ceremony was over. Someone later told me this simple event was the first public commemoration of the battle in years. Neither the Nez Perce nor any whites now found much to cheer about in White Bird Canyon.

One of the reasons my van proved so pathetic on hills was the library I carried with me in heavy boxes under the fold-down bed in the back. A few were paperback thrillers and mysteries, but most were histories of the American west ranging from Washington Irving's *Astoria* to Evan Connell's *Son of the Morning Star*. Among them was a 1978 work by James McDermott, a historian contracted by the National Park Service to unravel the events here at White Bird. Late into last night with a hissing lantern and a crackling camp-fire for light I had reread it and remained as impressed by his thoroughness as I had been the first time I had cracked its cover. He called the book *Forlorn Hope*. I mentioned the book to Denis, and his gaze went distant for a few seconds. With a sudden edge to his voice he told me he remembered when McDermott was here while researching the book. Only stayed a couple of days, Denis said. Interesting, I thought. Hoping he would continue, I merely nodded. People around here have a lot of differing opinions about what really happened down there, Denis added. Old-timers once told different stories, ones they heard when they were young. I asked him if he had any of those opinions, knew any of those stories. He grinned and answered that he was a farmer, and that left little time for looking into history. He felt guilty, he said, about taking even this one day off from the stuff that needed doing on his land. His wife was at home, working, as we talked.

The white speaker from the ceremony wandered by and greeted Denis with a handshake, then me. He turned out to be Frank Walker, Superintendent of the Nez Perce National Historical Park. With McDermott's book fresh in my memory I asked him to point out the specific route which two of the cavalry officers used to flee from the canyon. No one knows for sure, he told me. Somewhere along this canyon wall they made it up and out, he added, that's all we know for sure. By now most of the casual, tourist passers-by to the commemoration had left, and a loose caravan of cars and pickups was beginning the short drive to the town

of White Bird where the women of the Chief Joseph Warriors Society Auxiliary would host a picnic. Superintendent Walker said I was welcome and wandered off to shake more hands.

My van began the tedious climb back up the highway until, near the summit, I saw a narrow paved road veer off to the right. Unlike the newer highway curving downward along the west wall, this road, old U.S. 95, dropped directly to the canyon floor in a series of switchbacks then passed next to the ridge where only about seventy Nez Perce warriors thoroughly trounced the larger force of cavalry and citizen volunteers. When the brief fight was over the bodies of thirty-four dead soldiers lay strewn across the ground while the Nez Perce had suffered only three wounded. Despite the free food waiting ahead I couldn't resist slowing the van to a crawl then finally pulling over for a few minutes, the scene silent except for the wind.

As I drove the last mile to the town of White Bird, population about 100, the canyon walls closed in rapidly, squeezing the town into a narrow bottom along the creek and road. The houses were old and small, with porches and little fenced lawns. One tiny white church with a steeple, a still smaller library, a general store, two bars, an auto repair garage, a motel out of the 1930s, and not much more constituted downtown. Next to the general store was a postage-stamp-sized park, forty-odd people filling it up.

The Nez Perce women had finished setting out paper plates and plastic forks, trays of sandwiches, bowls of potato salad and chips and fruit salad, cake for dessert. Soft drinks cooled on ice. While a boy stared at me curiously, a smiling woman with streaks of gray in her black hair encouraged me to fill my plate, then take a second sandwich. I could stack it on top of that first one, she said. A long-time fan of egg salad on white bread in this age of whole wheat, I happily obliged.

I sat with Denis, who introduced me to the others at our table. Erma, across from me, wondered how I came to be interested in White Bird. Between bites of egg salad I was starting to tell her about my love of history and rambling among small towns when an image of another place flashed through my mind, a vision of a remote valley, a grassy flat beside a dark, clear stream. Rising from the grass were bare teepee poles as white as bone.

Years ago on one of my fishing trips to Montana I had chanced one stark, sunny afternoon upon the Big Hole National Battlefield in a secluded corner of Beaverhead County. The heat of the day was usually a miserable time for a dry-fly fishing, so I decided to take a look around. Skirting thick stands of willow, a path wound beside the little North Fork of the Big Hole River for about a mile to the reconstructed skeleton of a Nez Perce camp. Interspersed among the teepee poles were wooden foot-high markers planted in the grass, feathers for Nez Perce, blue hats for soldiers, brown ones for civilian volunteers. Each indicated the spot where one human had killed another. There were a lot of feathers and hats, and many of them represented Nez Perce women and children. I was chilled in the heat of the day. Walking back, near the parking lot I paused on a foot bridge over the river and slipped on my ultraviolet fishing sunglasses. The harsh, summer sunlight sliced through the surface reflection, illuminating every detail of the narrow, deep waterway. First one shadow revealed itself with the subtle flicker of a tail near a cut bank, then another. The channel teemed with trout. A sign said fishing was permitted. Not a chance. In my mind the stream still washed away blood that seeped through the soil.

Another woman named Carm suggested I stop by the county museum in Grangeville about fifteen miles to the north. Lots of Nez Perce and pioneer stuff, she said. She ran the place and planned to open it for a few hours in the afternoon. I said I would, then the conversation drifted to more important matters -- commodity prices, the cool weather, the prospect for the summer hay crop. Later that day, outside the Grangeville museum, I saw Denis again in his pickup. He spotted me, stopped, then got out carrying a rifle. I sincerely hoped I hadn't offended him somehow. Thought you might be interested in this, he said. Handing me the gun, Denis explained it was a Springfield .45-70 cavalry carbine once owned by Theodore Swarts back in the

1870s. The carbine was shorter and lighter than the rifle carried by infantry of that time, the barrel bore in this case being .45 inches, the shell loaded with 70 grains of gunpowder. To me the gun still felt substantial, heavy, lethal. Denis told me he had traced the serial number. The gun was manufactured in 1873, so Swarts probably carried it into the canyon that morning, Denis said proudly, adding that it could still fire a bullet. Racking open the chamber, I made sure the gun was unloaded, snapped the bolt shut, then pulled it up to my shoulder and sighted along its barrel into the past, wondering if Swarts had a chance to squeeze off even one round before he was wounded and the sudden rout began, wondering what really happened that day in June of 1877 down in White Bird Canyon.

Finding answers would take me years.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Nona Whitehouse:**

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**Pedro Lewis:**

People live in this new day time of lifestyle always make an effort to and must have the spare time or they will get lot of stress from both day to day life and work. So , if we ask do people have extra time, we will say absolutely indeed. People is human not really a robot. Then we ask again, what kind of activity do you possess when the spare time coming to you of course your answer will certainly unlimited right. Then do you try this one, reading guides. It can be your alternative throughout spending your spare time, the actual book you have read is definitely Dreamers.

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