

Trophy-home proposal dishonors the Nez Perce

BY MARY CHRISTINA WOOD
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THE epic struggle of the Nez Perce Indians to retain their beloved homeland is a saga of dishonor in this nation's history.

The Wallowa Band was expelled from its Wallowa Valley of Oregon in 1877, when Gen. Oliver Howard and his cavalry pursued them 1,500 miles to their surrender. Captured just 30 miles short of safe refuge at the Canadian border, Chief Joseph's surrender speech stirs us over a century later: "My heart is sick and sad. . . . From where the sun now stands, I shall fight no more forever."

This shameful past has never been set right. Now, the commissioners of Wallowa County confront a proposal to allow a subdivision of trophy homes next to the grave of Chief Joseph's father, Old Joseph. The proposal shocks the conscience.

The Nez Perce Indians had lived in the Wallowa Valley for thousands of years before Lewis and Clark journeyed through, clearing the way for a government policy that tore ancestral lands from native peoples.

Old Joseph, however, held his ground. He signed a treaty securing his band's rights to the full Wallowa Valley. But just seven years later, in 1863, the government reneged on its word, negotiating for the release of the homeland from another Nez Perce leader who had no authority to act for the Wallowa Band.

As Chief Joseph explained to treaty commissioners, "Suppose a white man . . . goes to my neighbor, and says to him, 'Joseph has some good horses. I want to buy them but he refuses to sell.' My neighbor answers, 'Pay me the money, and I will sell you Joseph's horses.' The white man returns to me and says, 'Joseph, I have bought your horses, and you must let me have them.' If we sold our lands to the government, this is the way they were bought."

The proposed subdivision is on land that is imprinted with a sacred promise made in 1871 as Old Joseph, near his death, transferred leadership of the band to his son. In Chief Joseph's own words:

"My father sent for me. I saw he was dying. I took his hand in mine. He said: 'My son, my body is returning to my mother earth, and my spirit is going very soon to see the Great Spirit Chief. Always remember that your father never sold this country. . . . My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother.' I pressed my father's hand and told him I would protect his grave with my life."

Old Joseph's gravesite overlooks the peaceful setting of Wallowa Lake, fringed by the Eagle Cap Mountains. The sanctity of the gravesite draws from the entire landscape and all of its components — the surrounding bluffs and mountains, the lake and its shoreline, the pure mountain air, and the sounds of shifting winds.

The developers of the subdivision contend that a 7-acre buffer between the gravesite and the luxury homes is sufficient. How ludicrous. We cannot slice the sacred along property lines. Joseph died in exile, never allowed to return to his homeland.



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The gravesite marker for Old Joseph stands next to a tree covered with scarves and dreamcatchers in Joseph, Ore.

Today, his descendants are resettling the valley, sharing the timeless traditions of their ancestors and collectively shaping a future with their neighbors. To them, the proposed desecration of this gravesite is heartbreaking, unthinkable.

The Nez Perce Tribe is fighting the subdivision under state and local land-use laws. But the law does not get at the heart of the matter. The moral force of Chief Joseph's promise has endured through the generations. Failure to honor it will eat away at our souls.

This year will be the 100th anniversary of Chief Joseph's death, on Sept. 21, 1904. It would be appalling to mark the centennial of this great leader's death by allowing a subdivision next to the grave that he promised to protect. Scores of Nez Perce people died on the honor of that promise. The sheer extravagance of 11 trophy homes is the ugliest sort of desecration. These homes will bleed the open wound of history as long as they stand.

Most developers simply want the money. This land could be purchased through public and private grants and put into permanent conservation as a landscape memorial to honor Chief Joseph. In the meantime, let us hope that the Wallowa County commissioners do not bring shame to this nation by approving the subdivision.



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