

‘They’ll know we haven’t forgotten them’

Horse slaughter remembered

By Jack McNeel, Today correspondent

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STATELINE, Idaho – “We come together to remember those who gave up their lives. They’ll know we haven’t forgotten them. They are just like our relatives, so we’re here today because it’s been a long time – 150 years – since that time.”

Thus did Ron J. Pond, Umatilla tribal member and professor at Washington State University, begin the memorial service commemorating the hundreds of Indian horses slaughtered by the U.S. Army.

It happened in the fall of 1858. In the spring of that year, the U.S. Army had been turned back and soundly defeated in a battle that took place a few miles south of present-day Spokane. The Army returned that fall with a much larger force and overwhelmed the Indian warriors from a number of tribes, most notably the Spokanes, Coeur d’Alenes and Palouse. They also captured a herd of roughly 1,000 horses belonging to the Indians. From that herd they selected about 130 for their own use and slaughtered the rest along the banks of the Spokane River. Their reason was to cripple the tribes by removing much of their ability to move very rapidly and to make life more difficult.

A lieutenant in the Army, Lawrence Kip, noted in his diary: “A corral was first made into which they were all driven. Then, one by one, they were lassoed and dragged out, and dispatched with a single shot. About 270 were killed in this way. The colts were led out and knocked in the head. It was distressing during all the following night, to hear the cries of the brood mares whose young had thus been taken from them. On the following day, to avoid the slow process of killing them separately, the companies were ordered to fire volleys into the corral.” Approximately 800 horses were killed in this slaughter.

The recent memorial service was organized by a senior citizens group in Spokane working with Pond and WSU to gather Indian people together on the site of the horse slaughter, not only in remembrance of what happened that day but also to keep the memory alive and bring some healing in the memories of those who had families involved in that battle.

A stone monument had been placed on the site in 1946, and it was there that Pond conducted a memorial service in early morning. That was followed by a memorial horse parade from the parking lot about two miles away, leading to the monument where the riders circled the monument and then returned to a spot where all could hear the speakers and hear the songs commemorating the event.

Wilson Wewa, enrolled Warm Springs, was there, representing his ancestors who lost many horses in the slaughter. The Yearout family, Appaloosa horse people from the Nez Perce reservation, was present on behalf of the Nez Perce Appaloosa Horse Club and the tribe. Others were present from the Umatilla Reservation and elsewhere. Those who rode were dressed in family regalia, some of it several generations old.

Several people spoke about their memories and family involvement. Wewa talked at some length about his family's involvement. He is the descendant of a Palouse (Paluus) chief who had huge herds of horses scattered over a large area and many of the horses killed here in 1858 belonged to him, according to the stories passed on to Wewa by his grandfathers. "It makes me feel good to be a part of this ceremony. To honor this land here. To represent the history of my family."

Rosa Yearout said, "I think this story needs to be more well known, about what happened with the horses. Events like this are very important for us to remember and to continue that healing. Our connection with the land, the sky and the animals has always been very close, especially the horses."

Some of the Nez Perce served as scouts for Col. George Wright during that battle, and that has been difficult for some to understand. Robbie Paul, Nez Perce, had an ancestor who served as a scout. "This is hard, why he chose to do that. I'm here to begin healing part of it. But we can't go back and judge our ancestors for what they did. They did what they did with what they knew at the time."

Bobbie Connor, Umatilla, is director of Tamastlikt Cultural Institute in Pendleton, Ore. "I think of those people and how they had to pick their hearts up off the ground. What they must have thought when they saw [800] dead horses? How did they recover from that? They had to be strong. They were amazing people, beautiful strong people, and we just strive to be like them."