



Antonio Sierra/Oregon Public Broadcasting

A drum circle provides the music for dancers at the Tamkaliks Celebration powwow in July.

## The Nez Perce people build story about return in Wallowa

By ANTONIO SIERRA  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

The hot summer day crept into evening by the time Fred Hill made his introduction.

"I want to welcome you here to the 30th annual Tamkaliks Celebration here in Wallowa, Oregon," the master of ceremonies said. "We've anticipated this for quite some time."

COVID-19 forced organizers to cancel the previous two powwows. Now, dancers were gathering outside the arbor, a circular structure with a parachute as a roof and three rows of bleachers for the spectators who assembled.

The drum circles started and voices rose in song. The Grand Entry had begun.

As the arbor filled with dozens of bodies in full regalia, people of all ages dressed in cloth and feathers of every color. The jingle of the metal on their regalia complemented the booming percussion that surrounded them.

The procession was led by men bearing the American flag and the Eagle Staff. To the Nez Perce, the eagle feather represents honor and good medicine.

Tamkaliks is an ongoing story about return. A return to celebration after two years of pandemic delays. A return to the homeland, and a hope for the future with even deeper roots.

Tamkaliks is the Nez Perce word for "where you can see the mountains." In the long days of summer, the looming Wallowa Mountains to the south of the campsite were still visible from the arbor.

The Walwama were back home.

The very first Tamkaliks took place in a high school gym.

Taz Conner, a member of the Nez Perce Tribe and a U.S. Forest Service employee, began meeting with city of Wallowa community members like Jo Hallam and Terry and Nancy Crenshaw in the 1980s. The goal was to create an event that would welcome back the Nez Perce, more than a century after the U.S. government exiled them from the Wallowa Valley.

There are nine federally recognized American Indian tribes in Oregon, but the Nez Perce Tribe isn't one of them. Despite its history in Eastern Oregon, the modern-day Nez Perce reservation is entirely contained in northern Idaho.

While the origins of the event are sometimes described as an economic development opportunity for the city of Wallowa, Taz Conner's niece, Bobbie Conner, said that was never the intent of tribal organizers.

"It wasn't really an agreement to help boost tourism," she said. "It wasn't an agreement to help with economic development. It was an agreement that we needed to welcome home to this country, the Wallowa country, the people whose ancestors were sent out of this country in exile in 1877."

The first celebration was held at Wallowa High School in 1991 and up until its start, Nancy Crenshaw was unsure how it would go.

"We didn't know if anybody, any Natives, were going to come," she said. "It was like, we're sitting there and all of a sudden, people started coming and they have their regalia."

Tamkaliks was successful enough in its first year to merit a second event, this time in an open field near town.

Like the Conners, Celeste Whitewolf was a descendant of the Nez Perce band that once lived in the far northeast of Oregon. She didn't attend the inaugural Tam-

kaliks, and she proceeded with caution when she decided to attend in 1992.

She was acutely aware of the history that led to the original flight of the Nez Perce, but more than 100 years later, she was won over by the sincerity of the non-tribal organizers.

"I purposely at one point asked them, 'Why are you guys doing this? Why are you white people asking us to come back here?'" she said. "And it was really (heartening) to hear them say, 'Because we want you here,' which is really a total different vibe than back in 1877. They didn't want us here in 1877."

Archeological and DNA records show Indigenous people have lived on the Columbia River plateau for millennia.

When the Nimiiipuu, later dubbed the Nez Perce by French fur traders, first encountered Euro Americans in the early 19th century, the event came on the far right end of their timeline.

At the Nez Perce Wallowa Homeland Visitor Center, the Wallowa tribal band's extensive history is squeezed into a small room.

The Nez Perce once inhabited 14 million acres across modern-day Oregon, Washington state and Idaho. Comprised of more than a dozen bands, the Nez Perce peoples shared language, religion and family, but each band had its own leader.

The Walwama — whose band, mountains and river were Anglicized to Wallowa — called the Wallowa Valley home. By the time the Nez Perce signed the Treaty of 1855 with the U.S. government, the Wallowa Band was led by Tiwitequis, also known as Old Chief Joseph.

The Treaty of 1855 shrunk the Nez Perce's land considerably, but the new reservation maintained much of the Wallowa's land in northeast Oregon.

The United States' position changed once gold was discovered in the area. Settlers began encroaching on tribal land and the U.S. government returned to the issue in 1863 with a much harder line. Federal officials proposed further cutting the reservation boundaries to 10% of its original size, based around Lapwai, Idaho.

The Wallowa Band withheld its support for the 1863 treaty, but the government designated one of the other Nez Perce band leaders as the "head chief" and used his approval to justify ratifying the treaty.

The Wallowa stayed on their land until the issue came to a head in 1877. By then, Old Chief Joseph had died and his son, Hinmatowyalahqit, or Young Chief Joseph, took over as leader.

Under threat from the U.S. Army, the Wallowa agreed to move to Lapwai. But shortly after they began their journey, men from a different band killed several white settlers as retaliation for the murder of a Nez Perce man. Even though the Wallowa were not involved with the raids, their concession turned into a war.

The Wallowa traveled more than 1,000 miles across the Idaho and Montana territories, engaging in multiple battles and skirmishes along the way.

With many tribal leaders dead and his band suffering from cold and hunger, Chief Joseph surrendered following a battle at Bear Paw, Montana, on Oct. 5, 1877.

The U.S. government would never allow the Wallowa Band to make a permanent return to its homeland. Wallowa County was established in 1887, named after a people who were no longer welcome.

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