

THE BATTLE OF THE GRAND RONDE.

Desperate Fight in Which Volunteers Ended the Yakima Indian War of 1856

Engagement That Made White Civilization Possible in the Land East of Cascades



MARKING THE SPOT WHERE THE INDIANS WERE SIGHTED ON JULY 17, 1856

COL. B. F. SHAW HERO OF THE BATTLE OF GRAND RONDE

PRO-CHIEF OF THE UMATILLAS WHOSE FATHER WE-NAP-SNOOTS WAS AMONG THE DEFEATED CHIEFTAINS IN THE BATTLE OF GRAND RONDE



OLD OREGON TRAIL MONUMENT ERRECTED NEAR BATTLEFIELD BY EZRA MEEKER

COL. SHAW ON THE BATTLEGROUND 57 YEARS AFTER

(Note—Since this article was written, the central figure of the battle, Colonel B. F. Shaw, passed to the great beyond.)
 BY HERB HUFFMAN.

So complete was the devastation wrought by the Indians of the Northwest during the Yakima Indian war of 1856 that Isaac I. Stevens, then governor of Washington Territory, wrote on June 1, 1856, that not a white man was to be found in all the country between the Dalles, Oregon, and Walla Walla, Washington Territory, a distance of 200 miles, and that not a house was left standing in that distance.

It was a most critical period in the life of the civilization of the Northwest. It was time for a master stroke to rescue the country from barbarism. And that master stroke fell when the allied tribes were defeated and scattered to the four winds by Colonel B. F. Shaw, commanding the Second Washington volunteers, when, in the battle of the Grand Ronde, fought on July 17, 1856, he won what Governor Stevens has designated in history as the most brilliant battle of the Yakima war.

The Grand Ronde Valley, nestled in its mountain fastnesses, far removed from the centers of Northwest civilization on Puget Sound and in the Willamette Valley, was an ideal rendezvous for the whipped and infuriated tribes which had been beaten and chased out of every hiding place. The gathering of the tribes, confederation of the Northwest tribes—Walla Walla, Nez Perces, Umatillas, Chinooks, Yakimas, Deschutes and John Day, from where they could sweep like a whirlwind upon the feeble volunteer forces gathered at Walla Walla after a victorious campaign through Eastern Washington.

From Burnt River, from John Day, from the Columbia, from Walla Walla, from Yakima, remnants of the proud tribes gathered, like rivulets merging into a mighty river, in the Grand Ronde, from which stronghold they were to rally forth through the narrow mountain passes to complete the destruction of the struggling civilization of the Inland Empire.

It was a master mind which conceived this savage plan for the extermination of the whites. History had not recorded which one of the great chiefs of that day first proposed such a confederation, but here in this mountain rendezvous, guarded by its miles of most impassable trails and roads, it was possible, if such a feat were anywhere possible, to make a final stand against the white invaders, with brilliant hopes of triumph.

Let us picture the Grand Ronde Valley as it was on the day of the battle, July 17, 1856. Walled in by its towering Blue mountains, it resembled a vast inland sea, so deep and lustrous were the waves of grass which rolled before its breezes. Not a house marked its entire borders. The courses of its streams were distinctly benched upon the landscape by the shimmering green foliage which grew upon the banks.

The only mark of civilization was the dim, white trail piercing its prairie grass and climbing out through the low pass at the south. On this trail the weary pilgrims, since 1842 had been wending their westward way. None of her populous towns—Union, La Grande, Summerville, Elgin, Cove, Island City, had been considered. The courses of its streams were distinctly benched upon the landscape. It was a beautiful and magnificent wilderness, more beautiful, perhaps, because of its wild aspects.

It was a neutral meeting ground for

all the Northwest tribes. They came here each year to fish, hunt, visit and hold horse races, the one infatigable sport of the mounted savage tribes of the Northwest. And so, when in dire need they were forced to form a confederation and fight for the very right to live anywhere between the Rocky and Cascade mountains, this secluded mountain fastness which had been the playground and heritage of their forefathers from time immemorial.

Gathering of the Tribes.

As volunteers drove the Indians before them out of the Yakima country and up the Columbia River, and harassed them in every valley and canyon of that great sage brush desert 260 miles in extent, the warriors gathered in Grand Ronde for a final fierce stand.

At Walla Walla the volunteers were gathering from every quarter, expecting to follow the fleeing Indians in the hills and mountains east and north. The Nez Perces were yet friendly, but there were whispers of treachery, and the air was filled with uncertainty, uneasiness, a sense of dozy peril, lest this last friendly tribe should join the hostiles and fall upon the volunteers unexpected and annihilate that brave and splendid band of defenders of the youthful civilization of the Northwest.

So when the news of the proposed confederation of the Grand Ronde was brought to the volunteers at Walla Walla by Captain John, a Nez Perce chief, it was decided to crush the allied tribes before they had time to gather any considerable force or supplies. It was sixty miles over a mountain range, with but dim roads to follow, but it was understood that a swift and terrible blow must be struck by the volunteers to prevent a victorious stand of the tribes in that last retreat.

Colonel B. F. Shaw, commanding the Second Washington volunteers, a young soldier, a daring Indian fighter, a dead shot and a man of keen foresight and excellent judgment, was ordered from Walla Walla to crush the gathering tribes and the present splendid civilization of the Inland Empire tells graphically how well he performed his duty.

In their side retreat, however, there was no more Indian war in this section of the country until the Banhook outbreak in 1878.

Taking 100 men with ten days' rations he started over the Blue mountains by night by a secret trail, with Captain John, the Nez Perce, as guide, intending to fall upon the hostiles unexpectedly in their side retreat.

The range was crossed without incident in quick time and on the evening of July 16 the volunteers camped on what is now the site of Summerville, in the northern extremity of Grand Ronde Valley.

On the morning of July 17 the command started southward along the emigrant trail leading toward the crossing of the Grand Ronde river near the present site of La Grande.

While riding in advance of the main command Colonel Shaw, in company with Major Maxon, Michael Marchman, Captain John and Dr. Burs, first sighted the Indian village about ten miles from the last camping place of the volunteers, about 8 o'clock in the morning, and immediately the command was formed in line of battle and advanced cautiously upon the village, which was deserted.

However, only a short distance away on the low lands of the river bottom the large company of fleeing squaws and children with pack horses, was sighted, and upon arriving upon the brow of a

slight hill the volunteers saw the main body of warriors 200 in number, riding through the brush on the river banks in battle array.

One hundred and fifty men of the company of volunteers were in the fore which was to attack the warriors, forty men in command of Captain Williams, now of Union, Oregon, being left behind the main force in charge of the pack animals and commissary.

Story of the Battle.

As Colonel Shaw stood beside me upon the battleground recently, after we had reared a rough stone monument to mark the spot, he talked most entertainingly of the engagement. He is yet a giant in stature, being over six feet in height with rugged face, showing something of the daring and determination which won the victory 51 years before.

"In my command," he said, "where a number of the most daring and adventurous men ever brought together in any country. They were always ready for any hazardous undertaking and the more perilous it appeared the more zealous they exhibited in the engagement. So when we sighted the Indians on the river bottom, it was with difficulty that I prevented my men from charging them fiercely. But as the Indians made signs that they wished to talk, I sent Captain John down to meet them and learn their desires.

"As John approached the Indians he saw that one carried a white man's scalp upon a pole, and before John could say a dozen words to the warriors, they shouted to each other to kill him, and half a dozen Indians dashed after him in an effort to cut him off from my company.

"At sight of this hostile act, commit-

ted under a white flag, also, I gave the command to charge the warriors; and, with a shout which I can yet hear in fancy, my men dashed down the hill on a gallop to attack the painted savages.

"Feeling an ambush on the riverbank, I directed my command to the left of the main body of warriors, in the direction of the squaws and pack train; and the warriors immediately divided, one body going to the support of the squaws and the other going straight into the brush on the river. My command soon engaged those which came to defend their pack train, while Major Maxon followed the party which went to defend the river-crossing.

Mostly a Running Fight.

"We were well armed, having rifles and revolvers, and in the fight which followed, we used revolvers largely, shooting right and left, killing, wounding and scattering the tribesmen with terrible rout. I can yet hear the sharp crackling of the revolvers as they felled the warriors and caused the crippled horses to rear and plunge and neigh in wildest confusion. After the first charge it was a running fight, squads of volunteers chasing squads of warriors, a hide-and-seek battle among the clumps of willows which lined the river-bank, with an occasional wild dash of a handful of Indians out into the open in an effort to cut off a handful of volunteers and run them down. But the battle was well fought, brilliant and victorious on part of my men. They behaved like soldiers and did a good day's work.

"At the first of the fight my men wanted to kill squaws, papooses and all, but I gave them positive orders

not to harm the women and children, and in the beginning of the fight I rode back and forth along the line of volunteers to see that the order was obeyed. So far as I know now, not a squaw was killed by a volunteer nor a dead warrior scalped by a white man that day.

"After a running fight of half an hour, the Indians were reunited and rallying, made a fierce stand at the ford of the river where Maxon first attacked the small body of warriors. Seeing that the entire body was forming for a stand I ordered a charge, and leaping my horse down an embankment 12 feet in height, I led the way across the Grand Ronde River, which swam our horses part of the distance across, and attacked them. In crossing the river to the attack, the Indians continued to fire upon us, we returning the fire from our revolvers from our swimming horses. Private Shirley Ensign was wounded by having a part of his nose shot away while riding near me. So far as I know, that was the first wound received by a volunteer in the battle. Afterward several were wounded and five were killed.

"Before retreating to make this stand at the ford, five warriors had been killed in an encounter with Captain Miller's company, and at the ford a large number were killed and wounded.

"The fight at the ford was brief, fierce and effective, and after submitting to our fire for a few minutes, the Indians fled in every direction, some going toward Powder River, some toward what is now Cove and some to the hills in the direction of the present site of Union. The remainder of the battle was a running charge with

occasional fusillades from warriors and volunteers until at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, with horses completely exhausted, we gave up the chase when there was not an Indian to be seen in the entire Grand Ronde Valley.

During the fight, which lasted from 8 o'clock in the morning until 3 in the afternoon, five volunteers were killed and were buried by their comrades where they fell in different parts of the battlefield, which now forms the rich farming section of the Grand Ronde River.

Colonel Shaw reported 50 Indians killed, and he says he is certain that 10 mortally wounded were carried away by their comrades, making the loss about 40 warriors out of 300 engaged. Over 200 horses were captured, about half of this number being unfit for use, were shot by the volunteers. Immense stores of provisions, including camas roots, venison, salmon, and berries, were captured and destroyed, and on the knoll where the village was first sighted in the morning, 100 tepees were piled and burned. One hundred pounds of powder was also captured.

When night fell upon that memorable day, not a vestige remained of what in the morning had promised to be the greatest confederation of tribes ever effected in the West. When the volunteers rode upon the high knoll to see that the order was obeyed, turning Indians, not a solitary horseman could be discovered in all the wide stretch of valley, and so the day was won for civilization and from that hour it became safer to live and work and travel in the great Inland Empire.

Incidents of the Battle.

Colonel Shaw tells several interesting incidents of the battle of the Grand Ronde. He says that after his party had chased the main body of warriors into the foothills in what is now the Cove on Mill Creek, one brave mounted on a magnificent horse rode out to taunt his soldiers and "dared them to fight." The horses of the volunteers were completely exhausted, and further pursuit was impossible, and the action of this warrior was especially gallant upon the weary men of his command.

"Twice this Indian rode out in a wide circle within rifle range of the volunteers, but all the shots missed him, and he yelled in defiance. Colonel Shaw asked to be allowed to shoot at him, alone, on the third circle made by the warrior, and trying his men for their poor marksmanship, he rested his rifle over his saddlehorse and took aim. Closer and closer the warrior rode, speeding his horse to the utmost, but as he made the turn and came in line with the rifle of Colonel Shaw, who fired, and the Indian tumbled up his hands and tumbled to the ground, dead. A spurt of blood from his death wound reddened the side of his horse, which ran back to the scene of the battle, and the last Indian killed in the battle, and the last Indian seen in the valley by the volunteers.

"Another incident which occurred during the day was related by Colonel Shaw. On the Grand Ronde River, near where it bends toward the mountains on the north side of the valley and perhaps 10 miles from the beginning of the battle, and while the running fight was at its height, Joe Standley, one of the daring few whom Colonel Shaw said in the evening of this narrative were always ready for any hazardous undertaking was seen

to single out a big warrior mounted on a good horse.

Pursued and pursued rode at break-neck speed over the prairie for a few hundred yards, Standley waiting to get closer before firing. Suddenly the Indian wheeled upon the old scout, and taking steady aim, fired at him from close range, but missed. Instantly the Indian put up his hands and shouted, in the Chinook language which was understood by all the volunteers, "Clow-how-its, clow-how-its." ("I give up, I give up." "Give up, will you?" said Standley, taking aim. "You have had your shot. Now when I have mine we will talk about 'clow-how-its,' and with the ringing report of the scout's revolver the warrior bit the dust.

Forty years afterward, by a strange fate, Standley lived upon a homestead on the exact spot on which this adventure took place.

Colonel Shaw says the Indians were well mounted, and had plenty of rifles and revolvers, but showed very poor marksmanship. The volunteers had good mounts in part, two horses each, and were well armed with rifles and revolvers, and for a running fight after a scattered and fleeing enemy, made a good record for marksmanship.

From two squaws, taken prisoners during the battle, and from Nez Perce John, who had advanced knowledge of the confederation, it is possible to gather that some of the greatest chiefs of the Northwest were engaged in the battle of the Grand Ronde.

Those who are known by Colonel Shaw to have taken part are as follows: Umatillas: Chick-lah and Flynn of the Cayuses; Stock, Whitley and Sim-mie-tas-ah of the Deschutes; Tah-kin (Tarquin), Walla Walla and others of less repute.

We-nap-snoots was the father of Peas, the degenerate chief of the Umatillas, who is now dying a slow death from chronic alcoholism in an asylum in South Dakota. His descendants may be seen every Fall, pulling sugar beets on the very scene of the battlefield on which their illustrious chiefs were defeated 51 years ago.

Five Crows had stood beside the emigrant road over the Blue Mountains ten years before the battle of the Grand Ronde, and begged a white wife from the passing emigrant trains, offering all the ponies in sight on the Umatilla hills for such a prize. At the massacre of Dr. Whitman and party in 1847, Five Crows seized one of the survivors of the terrible massacre, Miss Bewley, and secreted her in his tepee, where she remained for five weeks, until ransomed and rescued. Only a few years ago the same Five Crows, while riding from Pendleton, Or., to his tepee on the reservation near by, fell from his pony while drunk one Winter night, and was found in the morning in the center of the road, dead.

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Rich Agricultural Empire.

The land upon which the Indian village was located by Colonel Shaw and his command on July 17, 1856, was homesteaded in 1870 by H. W. Leasy, who was the first settler in Grand Ronde Valley, his residence dating from September, 1851.