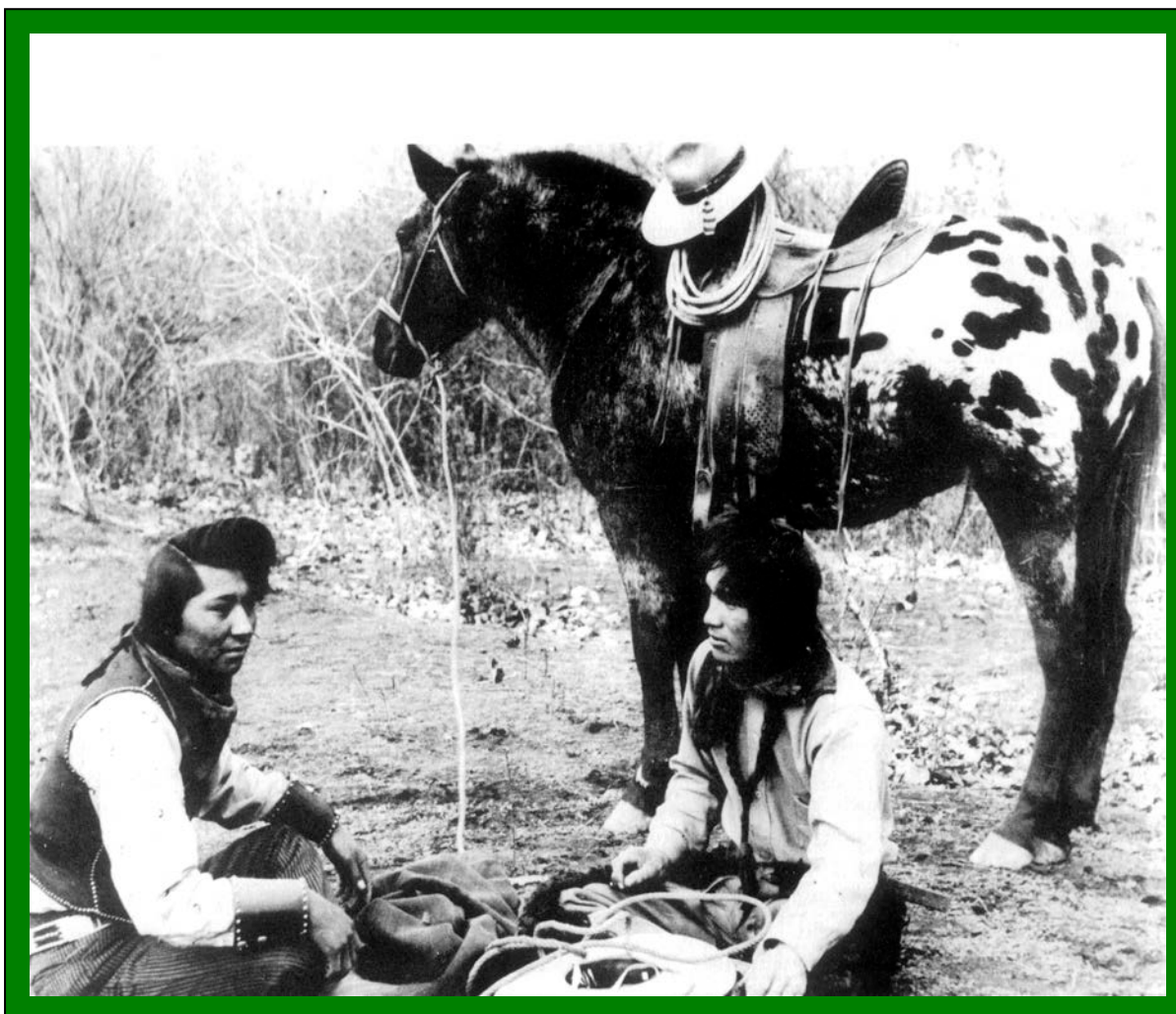


The Southern Nez Perce Trail Wise'isskit

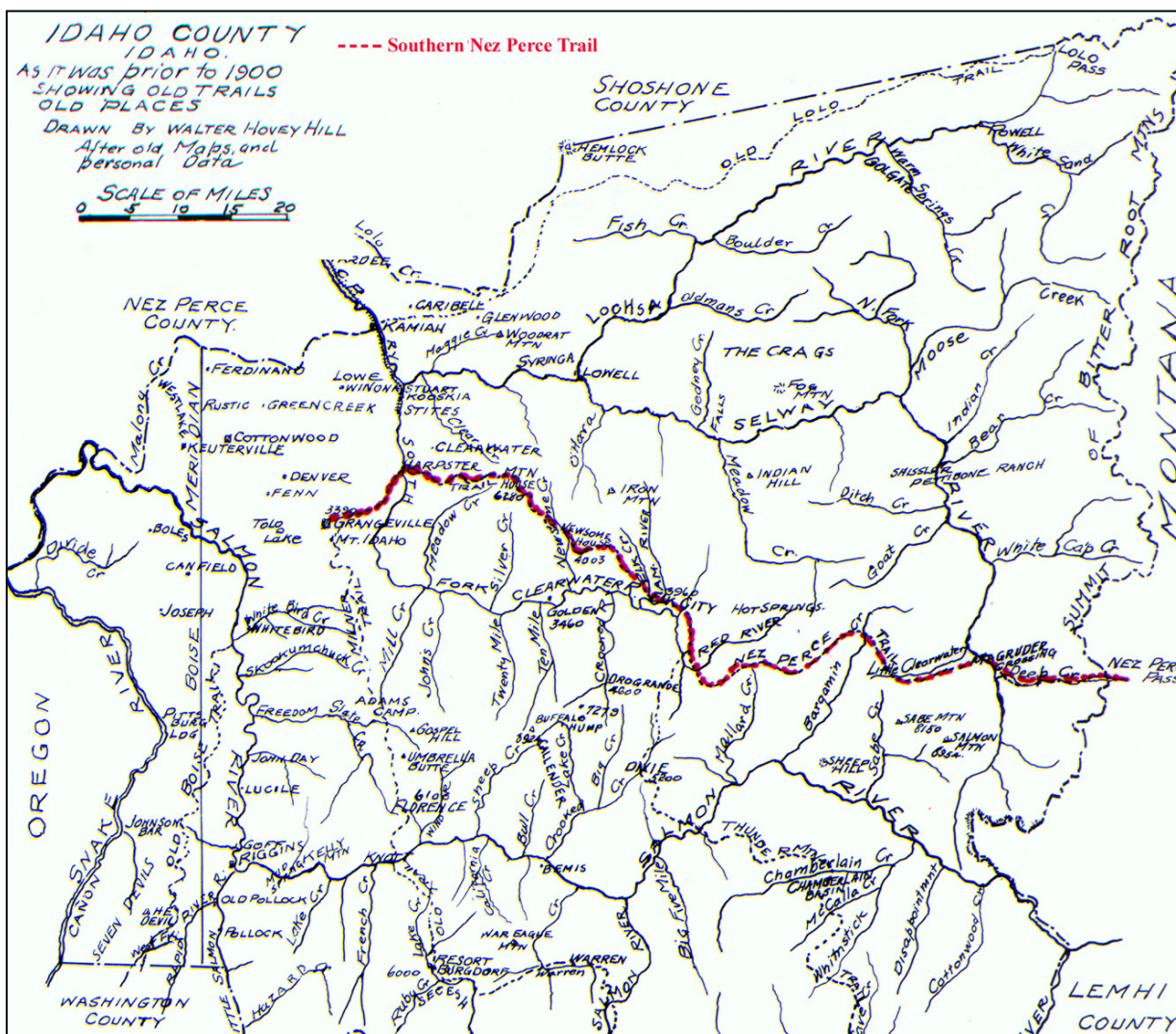


Nez Perce Indians and Appaloosa horse, ca 1895, from *Appaloosa*, Haines, pg. 76.
Public Domain Image on Wikipedia.

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The Southern Nez Perce Trail Wise'isskit

Wise'isskit or the Southern Nez Perce Trail was an important travel route for Native American people (primarily the Nez Perce), Euroamerican explorers, miners, and settlers. It and its northern counterpart, the Lolo Trail, traversed some of the most difficult terrain in the west, linking Idaho's river country with the plains of Montana. For thousands of years the Nez Perce used the southern trail to access the varied resources in the area and



travel to Montana's buffalo hunting grounds. Later Euroamericans, like Samuel Parker and Lloyd Magruder, traversed the trail for various purposes. The reasons for use of this route are as varied as the people who traveled it.

The Nee Mee Poo

To understand the development and use of the southern trail by Native Americans, one must first look at the Nez Perce way of life. The Nez Perce, who consider themselves the Nee Mee Poo or the People, have occupied north-central Idaho, southeastern Washington, and northeastern Oregon for countless generations. Nez Perce territory was centered on the middle Snake and Clearwater Rivers and the northern portion of the Salmon River basin in central Idaho. It supported diverse flora and fauna and its temperature and precipitation patterns reflected sharp variations in elevation. The area's many mountains, rivers, basins, and deep canyons provided a cornucopia of resources and protection from invaders. "In 1800 there were over 70 permanent villages ranging from 30 to 200 individuals, dependent on the season and type of social grouping. The Nez Perce seasonally migrated throughout their territory to take advantage of various resources, such as salmon and other fish, mountain goats and sheep, bear, moose, elk, deer, small game, and birds. Aboriginal food plants included camas bulbs, bitterroot, bark, pine nuts, sunflower seeds, wild carrots, wild onions, and several varieties of berries"¹. They also traveled to the Great Plains in search of buffalo. The Nez Perce generally lived in small villages along the many streams and rivers that cut through their aboriginal territory.

¹ Walker, Deward E., and Peter N. Jones. "The Nez Perce."
<<http://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/walker/>>, 15 October 2003.

“Long before the first Euro-American contact occurred with the Nez Perce, aspects of the Euro-American’s culture had reached the Nez Perce. By the mid eighteenth century, the horse reintroduced by the Spanish in to the New World, had become an integral and important part of Nez Perce society. The horse eased travel during the Nez Perce seasonal rounds, as well as facilitating in their hunting of the buffalo herds in the east. In 1805 the Nez Perce were the largest tribal grouping on the Plateau, with a population of about 6,000”.²

According to the National Register of Historic Places nomination form for the Trail, the Nez Perce call the Southern Nez Perce Trail “Wise’isskit” meaning camping trail. This trail was most likely established thousands of years before present. Dates from archaeological sites on the Nez Perce National Forest indicate that prehistoric use of the land the trail crosses dates to the Cascade phase (ca. 8000-4500 B.P.).³

According to the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for Wise’isskit, Nez Perce tribal historian Allen Slickpoo reported that the trail started around the mouth of the Clearwater River and extended all the way to the area of Three Forks, Montana, which the Nez Perce referred to as “Siminekemkuus.” The Nez Perce Indians’ traditional territory included much of what is now Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. They traded with the Salish, Cayuse, Crow, Umatilla, Shoshone, and Palouse tribes. Wise’isskit was the oldest and most important of the trails used by the Nez Perce and other western tribes to cross the Bitterroot Mountains. In earlier years,

² Walker, Deward E., and Peter N. Jones. “The Nez Perce.”

³ McKay, Kathryn L. “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Southern Nez Perce Trail”, Form on file at the Nez Perce National Forest Headquarter’s Office, Grangeville, Idaho, 1999.

buffalo and antelope were reportedly found in considerable numbers in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana, making it the nearest buffalo grounds to Nez Perce country. In August the Nez Perce would camp with the Salish and dig bitterroot. Native Americans favored the trail in pre-horse times because good campsites were located one day's walking distance apart. Slickpoo stated that there is an extensive oral tradition concerning Wise'isskit among the Nez Perce, including a Coyote myth that explains the origins of a series of small waterfalls along the South Fork of the Clearwater River.⁴

Prior to the horse, the Plains and Plateau Indians' main method of transportation was walking, accompanied by dogs carrying the family belongings. These dogs either bore their loads in small packs tied to their backs or pulled a travois.⁵ After the introduction of the horse the Nez Perce could travel longer distances in less time and carry more belongings. The development of horse packs and other special horse gear enabled the Nez Perce to easily transport goods over mountainous terrain. "This gear consisted of hemp and cornhusk saddle bags, women's saddles, men's saddles, horsehair rope, bison rope, saddle pad, horse quirt and crupper, parfleches, horsehair bridles or rawhide bridles, hobbles, rawhide hackamores, travois, travois hitches, and hide burn straps".⁶

The introduction of the horse to the Nez Perce people had a profound effect on their lives and would change their culture forever. The horse provided greater mobility and potential for more interaction between aboriginal groups. The horse also increased trade between native groups and presented the potential for conflicts between travelling tribes. The horse revolutionized areas such as transportation, hunting, warfare, and wealth,

⁴ McKay, Kathryn L. "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1999".

⁵ Josephy, Alvin M. *The American Heritage Book of Indians* (New York, New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1961).

⁶ Broncheau-McFarland, Sandy. *Tsoop-nit-pa-lu and a Corridor of Change: Evolution of an Ancient Travel Route Nee-Mee-Poo Trail*. Master's Degree Thesis. Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho.

creating a new lifestyle for Native Americans. Authorities on the Nez Perce place the acquisition of the horse at approximately 1730. After its introduction, the horse became a dominant part of Plateau culture.

With the horse, travelling to the buffalo hunting grounds in Montana was easier and soon the Nez Perce became more dependent upon bison for food, clothing, shelter, and trade. The Nez Perce were friendly with the Flathead people and some groups stayed east of the mountains for two or more years at a time.⁷ According to Francis Haines, when the Nez Percés traveled across the mountains to the east, they carried with them many trade goods, which they exchanged with the buffalo tribes for Plains products. From their own country came dried berries and cakes of camas and cowish; horns of the mountain sheep, and bowls, ladles, and spoons made from them; baskets of cedar root, flat wallets of Indian hemp, eagle feathers, arrows, and the famous Nez Perce bows, each valued at the price of a good horse. They also had salmon oil and dried salmon, pounded to powder, both packed in salmon skins; Indian hemp and twine; dentalia and other seashells, all obtained at the Dalles. They secured from the Plains tribes, buffalo products such as bone beads, horn spoons, pemmican, wallets and parfleches of rawhide and buffalo robes. Another article they wanted was the Sioux war bonnet with its long double tail of eagle feathers, an article useless except to a horseman, and unknown west of the mountains in earlier times.⁸

Each fall a hunting party would be made up of families from various villages. They would cross the mountains for a stay of from one to five years.⁹ They used several routes

⁷ Chalfant, Stuart A. *Nez Perce Indians* (New York, New York: Garland Publishing, 1974).

⁸ Haines, Francis. *The Nez Perce's, Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 43.

⁹ Haines, *The Nez Percés, Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau*, 45.

including the Northern Nez Perce Trail or Nee Mee Poo Trail that followed the ridges north of the Lochsa River via Lolo Creek. The Wise'isskit, or Southern Nez Perce Trail, followed the main divide between the Clearwater and Salmon Rivers through the Bitterroots into the southern end of the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. Although the southern trail was longer than the northern route, it was considered by many travelers to be the easier of the two, probably because it offered more camping sites. Native Americans used two other routes to cross the mountains. A middle trail followed the divide between the Lochsa and Selway rivers and descended in to the Bitterroot Valley via Lost Horse Pass. The final route followed the water grade by going from the area of Missoula, Montana, down the Clark Fork River to Idaho's Lake Pend Oreille.¹⁰

During the Nez Perce War of 1877, many of the non-treaty Nez Perce fled over the Lolo Trail. After the war was over, a small band of refugees returned from Canada over portions of Wise'isskit. Approximately twenty-four Indians traveled to the Bitterroot Valley, planning for the men to follow the Lolo Trail back to Idaho while the women took Wise'isskit. The refugees were camped about 90 miles from Elk City when a party of Euroamerican men captured most of the horses. The entire band then followed the southern route (Wise'isskit) to Idaho.¹¹ There is also a reference to the non-treaty Nez Perce traveling on the trail after the Nez Perce War in the book, *Bitterroot Trails*. In 1878 renegade Nez Perce Indians, who had made their escape from General Howard, were returning home to Lapwai, Idaho along the Southern Nez Perce Trail. The Nez Perce stole pack stock from a Bitterroot Valley rancher. Soldiers and settlers chased

¹⁰ Mckay, Kathryn. "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form", 1999.

¹¹ Mckay, Kathryn. "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form", 1999.

them over the Southern Nez Perce Trail where the stock was recaptured and the Indians escaped into the wilderness.¹²

Reverend Samuel Parker

“In 1835 the American Board of Foreign Missions appointed Dr. Marcus Whitman and Samuel Parker to establish a mission among the Indians of the Northwest”.¹³

According to a manuscript by Harold Anderson, they traveled west to establish a Protestant mission among the western Indians, particularly the Nez Perce. At the Green River rendezvous they met a group of Nez Perce people who were most eager to have a mission in their area. Because the opportunity seemed greater than they were prepared for, it was decided that Whitman would return to the East to organize a larger missionary effort. Parker was to proceed to the home country of the Nez Perce to locate suitable sites for missions.¹⁴ It was in this year that Reverend Parker and a group of Nez Perce Indians traveled along the Southern Nez Perce Trail or on spurs of this network of trails across the Bitterroot Mountains. Although Parker was very ill on the journey, he kept a detailed diary and therefore was credited to be the first white missionary to cross the Bitterroot Mountains into the Nez Perce country.

¹² Bitterroot Valley Historical Society. *Bitterroot Trails, Volume 1*. (Darby, Montana: Professional Impressions, 1982, 195).

¹³ Bailey, Robert G. *River of No Return*. (Lewiston, Idaho: Bailey Blake Printing Co., 1935, 54).

¹⁴ Anderson, Harold E. *The Travels of Reverend Samuel Parker Over the South Nez Perce Trail in 1835 on the Salmon and Bitterroot National Forest*. Manuscript on file, Nez Perce National Forest Supervisor's Office, Grangeville, Idaho, 1968.

Lewis and Clark and Corps of Discovery

There is some evidence that early nineteenth century explorers Lewis and Clark were aware of the existence of the Southern Nez Perce Trail. An 1805 journal account refers to a southern trail not obstructed by snow that may be Wise'isskit.¹⁵ Harold Anderson states that it took Reverend Samuel Parker 16 days to travel from the vicinity of Salmon Idaho to the area of Lewiston while it took Lewis and Clark 39 days to travel on the Lolo or Nee Mee Poo trail between the two same general points. During his trip Parker rested on two Sabbaths, while Lewis and Clark rested one day at Travelers Rest and laid over seven days on the Clearwater. Had Lewis and Clark known about the southern trail they could have negotiated the mountains in less time and avoided the Lolo crossing. "After leaving the Great Falls of the Missouri portage, the Corps of Discovery spent nearly two months following the river to its headwaters, crossing Lemhi Pass into the Salmon River area and stumbling northward into the Bitterroot Valley. One of their guides, a Shoshone called Toby, wasn't much help. He missed (or simply didn't know about) two opportunities to direct the expedition to the Southern Nez Perce Trail, an age-old and well-traveled route from buffalo hunting areas around the three forks of the Missouri through the Bitterroots to the Columbia River".¹⁶

Lloyd Magruder

Author Ladd Hamilton refers to Lloyd Magruder as a well-respected merchant, packer, and politician from Lewiston, Idaho. In August of 1863 Magruder left Lewiston

¹⁵ McKay, Kathryn, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form", 1999.

¹⁶Gilluly, Bob. Lewis, Clark Journey Presents Good Opportunities to Ask "What If"? Great Falls Tribune. <http://www.greatfallstribune.com/news/stories/20031019/localnews/481175.html>. [accessed 24 November 2004].

with some sixty mules loaded with supplies to sell to miners in Bannack, Montana. He traveled on the Southern Nez Perce Trail. When Magruder reached Bannack he found that mining community had dwindled and continued on to Virginia City where he sold his goods. In October, a few days after leaving Virginia City, four of the men Magruder had hired robbed and killed him and four other crew members. Today, a sign along the Southern Nez Perce Trail near the Idaho-Montana border marks the site of the five grisly murders.

Various accounts claim that Magruder had between 18,000 and 30,000 dollars (mostly in gold dust) with him. The murderers disposed of the bodies, burned evidence of their cold-blooded crime and fled to San Francisco with their loot. Hill Beachy, Magruder's friend, tracked the four men down and returned them to Lewiston where they stood trial.¹⁷ “Three of the four men were hanged, though not before Idaho discovered it actually had no criminal law”.¹⁸

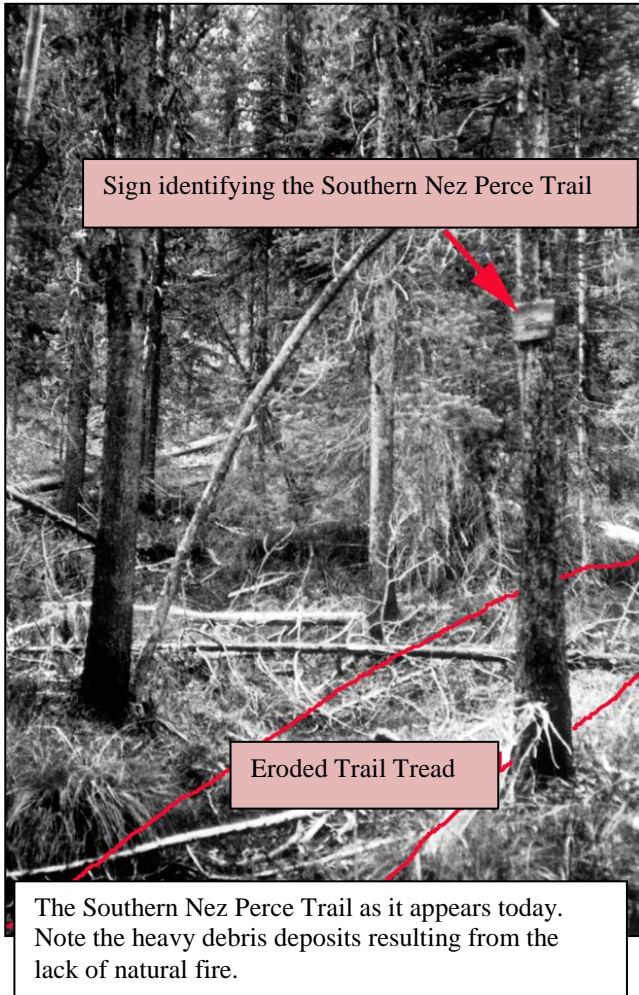
Conclusion

Today some sections of the original Southern Nez Perce Trail can still be seen. Unfortunately, however, large sections of the trail are lost, destroyed by modern development. The Elk City Wagon Road between Harpster and Elk City was built over portions of the trail in 1895. The Magruder Road from Red River to Darby, Montana was also constructed over sections of the trail in 1936. The segments of trail in Idaho that remain intact are in disrepair. In 1990 some parts of the trail were marked with wood

¹⁷ Hamilton, Ladd. *This Bloody Deed, The Magruder Incident* (Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1994), 88.

¹⁸ Schwantes, Carlos Arnaldo. *The Pacific Northwest* (Lincoln and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 137.

signs bearing a feather symbol. However, most of the trail has not been maintained for many years, and is overgrown with brush and trees. Despite this neglect, the tread is still very visible to the trained eye in many locations. Countless generations of use carved



the tread deep into the earth and in some areas it appears as a trench up to two feet deep.

The Southern Nez Perce Trail is an important part of the northwest's history; its significance established thousands of years ago. The Nez Perce used it to reach Montana's buffalo range where they hunted, traded, and interacted with other tribes, such as the Flathead. They traveled along it after the tragic Nez Perce War of 1877. Missionaries, hunters, trappers, gold miners,

traders, and others also used the old trail to cross the mountains.

Although the trail is not currently in use, the roads that run parallel to and cross it allow us to experience the route. Nez Perce tribal member Jamie Pinkham spoke of the trail in a speech he made in March of 2002. While driving home after a moose hunting trip with his family along one of the roads near the trail he remembers. "The drive home that night was along a rough ridge top road laid over an ancient Nez Perce trail; Forest

Service markers indicate that it is the Southern Nez Perce Trail. The Tribe used this trail to cross the Bitterroot Mountains to hunt and trade with the tribes on the plains. Miners, trappers, and eventually settlers discovered this trail. Eventually, the Forest Service cast a road over the top of it. During the drive, Dad remarked how he enjoyed his new granddaughter's company that day. It felt good, he said, to hear her cry. I was a bit puzzled so I stayed silent to let him continue. He wondered aloud about the days when her ancestors traveled this trail for the same reason we did. There were children, some in the early stages of life no different from Alex. They may have cried too and found comfort in their family. He said Alex made her presence known and she awakened the trail with her cries".¹⁹

If only the mountains and the trail that traverse its ridges, meadows, and streams could talk, what a story they would tell.

¹⁹ Pinkham, Jamie. People and the Land: Reflections of a Tribal Community. Speech made during a "Voices of Wilderness lecture series. www.friends-bwca.org/programs/pinkham.html [accessed 24 November 2004].

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