



Image stills from *Horse Tribe*. Courtesy of Nez Perce Historical Park and Janet Kern.



### Program Synopsis

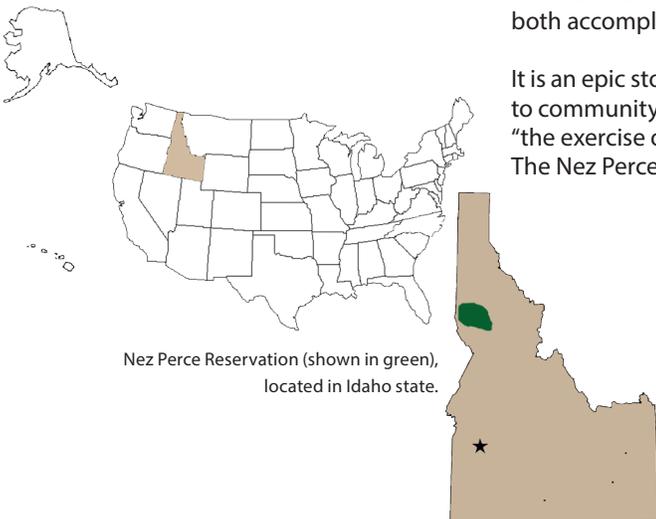
*"The horses understand what we're trying to do. They're in agreement with it. They understand our hopes, prayers, and dreams. The horses understand these songs."*

—Rudy Shebala (Navajo)

*Horse Tribe* is the story of a First People's love for horses. Poised upon the fulcrum of heritage and destiny, the 21st century Nez Perce of Lapwai, Idaho, concluded that timeworn notions of Native American nobility and loss are unproductive. Recognized for centuries as one of America's greatest horse tribes, they chose to implement a cultural renaissance by bringing horses back to their land and lives.

*Horse Tribe* documents their struggle to do so with the help of a charismatic Navajo horseman. His exceptional gifts bring legendary Nez Perce equine expertise to modern renown, and his mentorship of at-risk teenagers guides them toward the "strong medicine" of horses. However, his personal demons imperil both accomplishments.

It is an epic story about the connection of human to animal, history to life, individuals to community, despair to resolve, and values to action. Aristotle defines happiness as "the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence, in a life affording them scope." The Nez Perce Tribe and a Navajo horseman engaged in such a quest.



## Producer's Notes

### Janet Kern



Horses brought me to this story. I began riding as a little girl, and reluctantly continued as a teenager. My reluctance stemmed from being a part of a blue collar family that did not own expensive outfits or belong to exclusive social circles as my counterparts did.

Later, I took riding lessons to fulfill a college physical education requirement. I found myself riding for hours after class was over on the unfinished still-dirt Ohio

interstate. Being on horseback gave sweet relief from the rigors of a double major in political science and philosophy.

After college, I saved my wages as a NYC film technician and bought my first horse, an Appaloosa, who lived in a corral behind my mother's forest cabin. With him, I came to know the mountain in all seasons.

After finishing my Cold War documentary, *Begin With Me*, I was seeking another project. I saw an article in *The New York Times* titled "Tribe Known for Horses Sees Future in Them."

All the horses I had loved, and all the things I had studied, suddenly came together.

We began work on *Horse Tribe* in 1998, expecting to have a finished film within five years. But, when completion fundraising difficulties coincided with a radical change in the storyline, there was nothing for it but to keep shooting. I think that every documentary director finishes a project with at least three films—the one envisioned, the one completed, and the one that got away. We set out to portray children and society flourishing in the company of horses, and the ancient equestrian culture of one of America's great horse tribes adapting to modern purpose. The story, as it evolved, became a more complex, nuanced account of vision and grit, a community in conflict, a man in crisis, and a beloved herd at risk.

I have fond memories of my time spent filming. For instance, I discovered that simply holding the halter of a skittish horse on a windy hillside so that the rider could saddle up would lead to a critical endorsement of character, and that sitting fully clothed in a cool river on a sweltering day with a silent elder would lead to friendship. These are exquisite things. The inexplicably generous instincts of a people who have experienced incomprehensible loss are a lesson, a mystery, and a gift to me. I am privileged to have been among the Nez Perce.

## By the Numbers

- The Nez Perce name, which means "pierced nose" in French was given to the tribe by **an interpreter** with the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Piercing was not actually a cultural practice of the people who call themselves the Nimiipuu which means, "the people."
- The original territory of the Nimiipuu people covered **approximately 27 thousand square miles** which stretched across North Central Idaho and into Southeastern Washington, Northeastern Oregon, and some areas of Montana and Wyoming. The Nez Perce Indian Reservation today covers about **750,000 acres** and has **about 3,500 enrolled members**. Its headquarters is in Lapwai, Idaho.
- It is estimated that horses were first brought to North America by the Spanish **around 1730** and the use of horses quickly spread to the Plains Indians. Nez Perce were recognized as one of America's greatest horse tribes. The Nez Perce are believed to be the only tribe to geld horses for selective breeding.
- The Appaloosa, with its spotted hide, has been found in ancient pictographs in **both** Chinese and Asian art.
- We'eyekin, a term which is mentioned **several times** in the film, is defined as "powers bestowed on a human being by an animal or other force of nature." For example, the famous Nez Perce bronc rider, Jackson Sundown, attributed his ability to stay on a bucking horse to his horsefly we'eyekin.
- The Nez Perce were considered a wealthy people by many standards. One historical account claims a herd of **10,000 horses** was once seen.
- Chief Joseph once said, "I do not need your help. We have **plenty**. We are content and happy if the white man will leave us alone. The reservation is **too small** for so **many people** with all their stock. You can keep your presents. We can go to your towns and pay for all we need. We have **plenty** of horses and cattle to sell, and we won't have any help from you. We are free now. We can go where we please. Our fathers were born here—for here, they lived, they died. Here are their graves. We will never leave them."
- After gold was discovered in Nez Perce Territory in 1860, the U.S. government tried to impose the **Treaty of 1863**, but some chiefs refused because their lands were **reduced to 1/10th** of what they were. This eventually led to the **War of 1877** against the non-treaty Nez Perce, who chose emigration to Canada over life on a reservation. Before leaving, some young warriors attacked white settlers who had killed the boys' relatives a few years before.



Image still from *Horse Tribe*. Courtesy of Nez Perce Historical Park.

## Discussion Questions: Exploring the Facts

1. Rudy says, "The horses understand what we're trying to do. They're in agreement with it." The Nez Perce as well as many tribal nations maintained a close relationship with both the plant and animal worlds with the understanding that we get not just physical power from these sources but spiritual power. Explore how this theme plays out in the film and how you feel personally about these beliefs. Do you think there can be a strong connection between human and an animal? Have you ever had such a connection with an animal? What did it give you that you couldn't have gotten someplace else?
2. Why do you think the Nez Perce people feel it is important to once again be a strong horse people? Compare and contrast how their culture was before the horses were taken away by the U.S. Government with their current culture. What are the differences? What are the similarities?
3. It is clear in the text of the film that not everybody was comfortable with a Navajo man running the Horse Registry for the Nez Perce tribe. What do you think is the underlying cause of this discomfort? Is ethnic, racial, and religious prejudice an integral part of our human character?
4. At the end of the Nez Perce War of 1877, the American Army promised the non-treaty Nez Perce that they could keep their horses. This promise was broken, as the horses were then taken and sold. What immediate impact do you think an event like this has on both the spirit and the livelihood of the tribe? Do you think that an event like this can have long-term effects? What effects do you think the taking of the horses from the Nez Perce tribe has had on the current generation?
5. Besides the goal of creating a new breed of Nez Perce horses, the program also worked closely with the tribal youth. Do you think working with horses can have a positive effect on young people? What do you think having a relationship with a large animal like a horse can do for a young person?
6. The presence of wild horses on public lands in the West often conflicts with the interests of cattle ranchers who want to graze their herds there. Can you imagine a way to resolve these competing needs? In the film, a tribal member says, "The Nez Perce were one of the only tribes that would not eat its horses under any circumstances." What are the ramifications of choosing a spiritual obligation over economic necessity, or the opposite?



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## Ideas for Action

1. As a class or a group, do a thorough exploration of the treaty and battles leading up to and following the taking of the horses from the Nez Perce people. What else did they lose? Who were the key people involved in the struggle both on the government side and the Nez Perce side?
2. In the film, one of the speakers says that the taking of the horses and the Nez Perce War was “our 9-11.” As a group or class, conduct a serious inquiry into what is considered “terrorist” behaviors today and how these activities compare and contrast to tactics used by the U.S. Government against Native people. Manage the discussion carefully to allow for full exploration of words like freedom, terrorism, war, genocide, and any other terms that may arise during this discussion. How does the use of these terms change according to whomever is speaking them?
3. In the film, Jessica Redheart says that the “horses healed my heart.” In modern society, equine therapy has become a popular way of working with both mentally and physically disabled people. On the Internet or in the library, explore the practices of equine therapy and delve into the research to discover what positive effects people are discovering from these horse programs. How many places are using horses to “heal the hearts” of individuals?
4. As a class or group, create a map of Nez Perce Territory and then create a pictograph that covers both the timeline and the distance covered during the flight of Chief Joseph and the “non-treaty signers” as they moved away from the U.S. army troops that were chasing them. Include any significant encounters or information that you discover about this three month journey.

## Resources

### About the Nez Perce:

- <http://www.nezpercehorseregistry.com/07-09.html>
- <http://www.nezperce.org>
- <http://www.nezperce.com>
- <http://cityoflapwai.com>

### Nez Perce Horse Sites

- Nez Perce Horse Registry  
<http://www.nezpercehorseregistry.com>
- M-Y Sweetwater Ranch in Lapwai, Idaho  
<http://www.nezperceappaloosas.com>
- Dreamer Horse Farms  
<http://www.dreamerhorsefarm.com>

### Nez Perce National Historical Park

- <http://www.nps.gov/nepe/index.htm>

### Articles on the Nez Perce Horse

- <http://www.emeraldtracing.com/boone120699.html>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nez\\_Perce\\_Horse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nez_Perce_Horse)
- <http://www.friendsnezpercebattlefields.org/The-nez-perce-battles.htm>

### Books

- *The Nez Perce and the Opening of the Northwest*, by Alvin Josephy
- *Lewis and Clark Among the Nez Perce*, by Allen Pinkham and Steven Evans
- *Yellow Wolf, His Own Story*, by Lucullus McWhorter
- *1491*, by Charles C. Mann
- *Short Nights of the Shadowcatcher* (a biography of Edward Curtis), by Timothy Egan
- *Doing Documentary Work*, by Robert Coles



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This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a Master's in Human Development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books along with one novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written over 70 documentary programs including Public Radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

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Educational resources for this film are available at [www.visionmakermedia.org/education/horse-tribe](http://www.visionmakermedia.org/education/horse-tribe).

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