

THE REACQUISITION OF NEZ PERCE ARTIFACTS (Spalding-Allen Collection)



Historical Background

At the center of every culture there is a creation story. For the *Nimiipuu* (The People) or Nez Perce, the story begins at the landmark near Kamiah, Idaho called *tim'népe*, or Heart of the Monster, where *'iceyéeye* (Coyote) killed a monster who was eating all the animals. After the monster was killed, "Coyote washed his hands in water to get the blood off and scattered the blood droplets on the ground. When those drops of blood hit the earth, human beings sprang up as *Nimiipuu*, the Nez Perce people." This, and other stories, form the foundation of the Nez Perce value system where all things have life, and all things are important to a balanced world.

Plants and animals, as well as clothing and shelter made from these living things, are a part of who the Nez Perce are. The Nez Perce do not see human beings as the world's dominant creatures, but rather, the Nez Perce view is one of symmetry in the natural world of which the

Nez Perce is only a part. Nakia Williamson, Nez Perce Tribal member and Director of the Nez Perce Tribe ("Tribe") Cultural Resource Program explains, "the deer and the other ungulates, bighorn sheep, elk, that was their sacrifice to us," he says "something as simple as a buckskin dress reaffirms our identity, our lineage, our connection to the land and how it is connected to us. It is a reciprocal relationship to us."

By the 1830s, the Nez Perce were beginning to interact with other human beings, Europeans with very different value systems. Nez Perce artisans were continuing to create—and hand down to their children and grandchildren—unique and beautiful clothing to be worn for special occasions. The clothing was adorned with coveted shells, the hides of deer, buffalo, and elk, and beautiful, complex beadwork.

The clothing hand-crafted by the Nez Perce was viewed as a symbol of an unenlightened life by Christian missionaries, including Henry Spalding, a Presbyterian minister sent to bring the Bible to the Nez Perce people. Spalding—recognizing the value of the Nez Perce items in the trade for commodities, instructed that wearing such items was contrary to a Christian lifestyle.

During the mid-1840s, as Spalding acquired these traditional Nez Perce items, he sent them to Dr. Dudley Allen, a

benefactor in Ohio whom he had met while attending divinity school and with whom he had corresponded regarding the items between 1845 and 1847. Following Dr. Allen's death, his son donated the items, known as the Spalding-Allen Collection, to Oberlin College in 1893. Oberlin College in turn loaned most, but not all, of the collection to the Ohio Historical Society, now known as the Ohio Historical Connection. The Nez Perce items were never displayed at Oberlin College or the Ohio Historical Connection.

In 1976, Bill Holm, curator of the Burke Museum at the University of Washington informed the curator at Nez Perce National Historical Park ("Park") about the Spalding-Allen artifacts at the Ohio Historical Connection. The Park reached out to the museum and after some negotiations, Ohio Historical Connection agreed to loan the collection to the Park. The Nez Perce items, housed in specially built display cases, remained on display at the Park for nearly 20 years.



Collection Items

The Spalding-Allen Collection (soon to be renamed) consists of



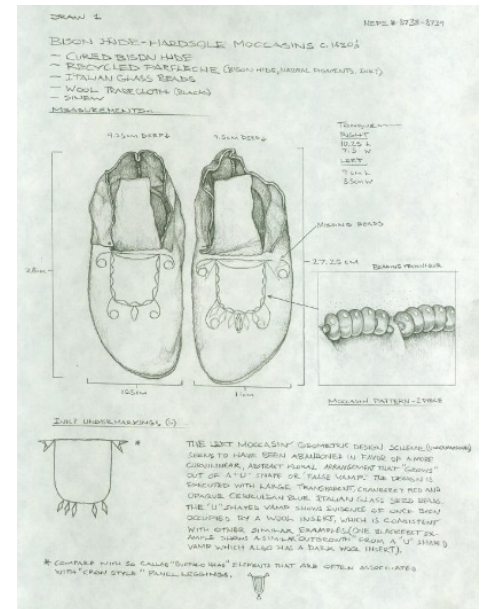
21 items made by Nez Perce men and women. The items include:

- Men's hide shirt decorated with quills, beads, and cloth
- Men's hide shirt decorated with quills, black and white venetian beads, and fringe
- Women's elk hide dress decorated with dentalium shells, thimbles, glass beads, and fringe
- Cradleboard made from teardrop shaped buckskin, decorated with glass beads, dentalium shells, elk teeth, and fringe
- Women's elk hide dress decorated with glass beads, elk teeth, and fringe
- Moccasins made from moose or caribou hide, decorated with quills
- Two-piece parfleche painted sole Moccasins made from bison hide
- Women's saddle made from bison hide on a cottonwood frame
- Deer head bag, three pieces, beads on bison hide upper, deer skin lower
- Square braid weaved horsehair rope
- Horse crupper made from bison hide, decorated with red wool and blue trade cloth, fringe, and tin and cone jingles
- Dentalia shell bracelet (or hair tie) made from bison hide, decorated with beads
- Men's deer hide leggings decorated with fringe and quills

- Elk antler quilt (whip) with decorative markings and brass embellishments
- Flat trapezoid-shaped storage bag made from hemp and cornhusk, featuring a dyed cornhusk hourglass design
- Flat storage bag made from hemp and cornhusk, featuring decorations made of bear grass and dyed using Oregon grapes
- Flat weave Bison hair rope with knotted ends, decorated with red wool cloth
- Men's belt and pouch, made from hide, decorated with fringe and glass beads
- Three women's woven hats featuring various designs

In 1993, the Ohio Historical Connection notified the Park that they wanted the items permanently returned to them which triggered a series of events that resulted in the Tribe reacquiring this important collection. The Park and tribal leaders asked the Ohio Historical Connection to donate the items which would remain on display at the Park. The Ohio Historical Connection declined to do this saying that they had a fiduciary duty to their patrons to either keep the items or sell them at fair market value. This put the Tribe in a very difficult position as they did not have the amount of cash on hand that it would take to purchase the valuable collection. The Tribe then formed a committee tasked with pursuing all options to ensure that the items remained where

they belonged—in the Nez Perce homeland.



In December 1995—absent federal protections that would allow the Tribe to retain what was rightfully theirs—the Tribe, through negotiations, agreed to purchase the collection from the Ohio Historical Connection for its full appraised value of \$608,100 to be paid within six months. This amount included the purchase of one additional, but significant, item that remained in Ohio, a Nez Perce cradleboard. Although the Tribe was confident in their mission—ensuring that the items remained in Nez Perce country—they were unsure of how they could raise such a large amount of money in such a short amount of time.

The Tribe immediately hired an economic development strategist, Tom Hudson, to help raise the funds to purchase the Nez Perce items from the Ohio Historical Connection. Hudson



was successful at engaging the local community and even casting a wider net by appealing to the global community through celebrities and the media.

Thousands of donors responded by contributing simply because they empathized with the Nez Perce and realized the injustice of the situation—that the Nez Perce were being required to buy back items that belonged to them. Even as the six-month deadline approached, Hudson was unsure if the fundraising goal would be reached.

Thousands of people across the country contributed to this cause to help the Tribe achieve its goal of reacquiring these precious items. The goal was reached two days before the deadline. The items mean so much more to the Nez Perce people than they ever could have to Spalding or the Ohio Historical Connection.

In June 1996, Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee (“NPTEC”) member Julia Davis-Wheeler, through tears of joy, told the Lewiston Morning Tribune, “[i]t was just an internal burning feeling for all of the tribe to say Yes, we can do this,” referring to raising the funds to bring the artifacts home, and saying further, “[w]e need to push ourselves that extra mile just as our ancestors did.”

Belonging

Upon payment by the Tribe, Bob Chenoweth, curator at NPNHP, traveled to Columbus, Ohio to retrieve the cradleboard from the

Ohio Historical Connection. NPTEC Chairman, Samuel N. Penney, was present when the cradleboard was unpacked at the Park’s museum. He described a powerful spiritual feeling of connectedness at that moment, as if the life of those items were somehow finally made whole.



25th Anniversary and Renaming Celebration

The NPTEC created a Planning Committee (“Committee”) to organize a celebration acknowledging the return of the artifacts to the Nez Perce homeland, and most importantly, to appropriately rename the collection. The Committee is excited to come together with friends, both old and new, to celebrate this monumental event.

The Committee intends to involve Nez Perce children with its pre-planning workshops and with developing a series of

preview events to raise awareness about the artifacts and celebrate the Tribe’s secure ownership of the collection. Author Trevor Bond, Associate Dean of the Digital Initiatives and Special Collections at Washington State University, wrote a book about the Tribe’s reacquisition of the collection and the Committee hopes to incorporate the introduction of Bond’s book at each event.

Funding

The Committee is seeking donations to help host a series of workshops and other events leading up to the 25th Anniversary and Renaming celebration. Donations will be used to purchase materials for making ribbon skirts and shirts; pay honorariums to artists to create a logo for the renaming; purchase items that will be available to the public for purchase as souvenirs (leather key chains, hemp t-shirts and hats); accommodations and gifts for honored guests, to name a few. All contributors will be acknowledged at the 25th Anniversary and Renaming celebration and at the various workshops and activities leading up to the main event.

The Nez Perce artifacts—which will be on display during the weeks leading up to the 25th Anniversary and Renaming celebration—are being curated with much care by Nez Perce National Historical Park staff in the homeland of the *Nimiipuu*,



where they have always belonged.

Back to the Beginning

The Tribe's effort at renaming the collection is an significant endeavor. This is an important step in decolonizing how ethnographic items are collected and identified and a way to reconnect these cultural items back to their original cultural context and function within *Nimiipuu* society. The renaming symbolizes how significant these items are. The return of these items, a part of who the Nez Perce are, has brought the *Nimiipuu* closer to being whole. Nakia Williamson succinctly explains, that these items were always meant to be part of *Nimiipuu* family lineage, handed down from one generation to the next.

The *Nimiipuu*, were a vital link in a very expansive and dynamic trade network covering hundreds of miles of terrain that had been built up over centuries among the Tribes. During that time, the *Nimiipuu* obtained highly prized items and novelties, such as brass, shell beads, and other materials used in this collection. Despite the rapid changes in the United States during the nineteenth century, the *Nimiipuu* managed to retain many aspects of their culture, including the artistry of adorning clothing and bags with buckskin, antlers, elk teeth, and other items from nature demonstrated in this collection. As new beads,

ribbon, thread, cloth, and additional items from other areas became available, they were incorporated into the creation of these unique items and reinterpreted into a uniquely *Nimiipuu* aesthetic and world view. The artist's vision and individual detail for each item can now be celebrated by all Nez Perce as a direct connection to their ancestor's thoughts interpreted in each item. The careful planning and mind set of each piece marking the artist's place in the continuum before the big changes that were yet to come.

The essence of this particular story is that these long-lost Nez Perce items and adornments are where they belong. This renaming of the collection represents a point in *Nimiipuu* history in which tribal members can take comfort that their healing and restoration is progressing. As the items are assimilated with the descendants of those that created them, tribal members can find some peace that this place, the place where the *Nimiipuu* were also created, now assumes the protection of these items that otherwise could have been lost to them forever. The series of fortunate events that led to their return was a sign that the items ultimate destination was inevitable, and the circle is complete and whole again. The collection is home. The collection is identified in Nez Perce by Nez Perce using the first language. Everything is better and more right with the

world, 'tamáalwit'. The light now shines forever brighter, saying to us we have returned, and we are home again.

“Our traditional relationship with the earth was more than just reverence for the land. It was knowing that every living thing had been placed here by the Creator and that we were part of a sacred relationship...entrusted with the care and protection of our Mother Earth, we could not stand apart from our environment.” —Elsie Maynard, Nez Perce Elder, in *Wetes pe m'ewes* (I Am of This Land) p. 8

The travails of the items' journey, in many ways, parallels that of the Nez Perce people. Trauma has been intertwined in the history of the Nez Perce people since the coming of the change. The symbolism of the renaming can be used to counter, fend off and help to dispel the trauma. The Nez Perce people are resilient and will grow stronger as the tamáalwit, nature's world order, comes in balance again.

The Planning Committee intends to build on this journey toward wholeness by acknowledging, on a yearly basis, the story about the items returning home. Historically, the Nez Perce imparted basic beliefs and life lessons in their stories. It was a way to teach and to explain the natural world. Hunting, gathering, and fishing were also activities subject to a good story. Modern Nez Perce can now look



to this most authentic *Nimiipuu* collection as inspiration for their own designs on newly created dresses, bags, and shirts. The designs of old will not be lost, but rather serve to connect each Nez Perce to their ancestors as they create new pieces. Significantly, these collections represent the *Nimiipuu* value system, value of Land and our place and connection to all of Life where *'iceyéeye* says we originated from. Functional, our regalia re-enforces these values and memorializes our ancestors, who embodied our 'way of life' which we seek to preserve. In addition, recognition of our lineage through this collection ties us to the Land and the generations of *Nimiipuu* who endured upon this landscape and thrived. The Planning Committee has dedicated their efforts for the completion of this project to the future dreams and aspirations of our descendants. *Yox kaló'* — That is all I have to say.

