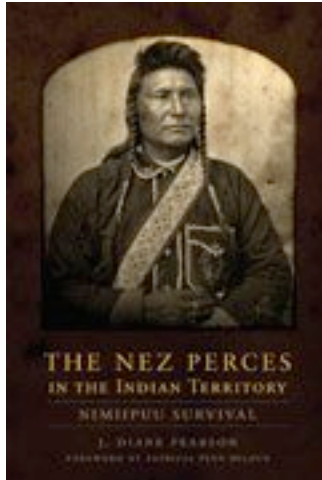


Native American Book Reviews

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The Nez Perces in the Indian Territory: Nimiipuu Survival. By J. Diane Pearson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, June 2008. Cloth: ISBN 978-1-59213-870-8, \$34.95. 383 pages.

Review by Bradley Montgomery-Anderson, Northeastern State University, Oklahoma

The *Nez Perces in the Indian Territory* is an absorbing account of a period when the Federal government used relocation to Indian Territory as a means of punishment for what it viewed as recalcitrant tribes. Following their 1877 defeat in Montana, Chief Joseph's followers were relocated to a small reservation in the north central portion of the Indian Territory. Author J. Diane Pearson fills a significant gap in their story; the previous literature on this tribe focuses on the war and the attempted flight to Canada. Pearson's substitution of the designation "Nez Perce" with the group's self-designation, Nimiipuu, indicates the indigenous perspective she presents. The Nimiipuu survive a harrowing seven-year ordeal that includes an eight-month stay at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and an initial attempt at relocation at the Quapaw agency in the northeastern corner of the Territory. After ten months of substandard living conditions and bureaucratic incompetence, the Nimiipuu were finally settled near present-day Ponca City, Oklahoma, on what was intended to be their reservation. Pearson deftly traces the journey and paints an intimate portrait of the Nimiipuu as they tried to adjust to a new way of life while at the same time steadfastly refusing to give up hope of returning home. What makes her account of this experience especially remarkable is her presentation of the variety of attitudes toward the prisoners and their plight. At many stages of their journey the prisoners were treated as celebrities: a circus-like atmosphere prevailed as spectators hunted for souvenirs, gawked at ceremonials, and constantly sought to meet with Chief Joseph. Throughout the work, Pearson emphasizes Chief Joseph's diplomatic attempts to improve his people's living conditions, as well as his persistent efforts to leave the Territory. Such persistence was necessary as the Department of the Interior and the Army argued over expenses, and inept bureaucrats failed to supply adequate provisions. Pearson's depiction of the Nimiipuu's journey to and experience on the Indian Territory reservation reveals an intriguing cross-section of late nineteenth-century attitudes towards Native Americans. Throughout the text she provides local newspapers' reactions to the presence of the detainees, as well as accounts of groups that are

sympathetic to their cause. Pearson does an excellent job of using such sources to portray the social and economic complexity of the world into which the Federal government had thrust the Nimiipuu. For example, she makes an insightful comparison between the experience in northeastern Indian Territory and at the Oakland sub-agency in north central Indian Territory where they spend the greater part of their exile. The local population at their would-be reservation was “more progressive than eastern Kansas and Southern Missouri, and people were more accepting of American Indians’ participation in economic and social structures” (171). Pearson is at her best when she portrays the Nimiipuu’s adaption to the complex lifeways, both economical and cultural, of the Kansas-Indian Territory border region. It is fascinating to read about the economic and social interactions with the border town of Arkansas City, Kansas, as well as the experience of the Indian students at nearby Chilocco Indian Industrial School. Pearson devotes a chapter to the topic of Indian schools and discusses the experiences of Nimiipuu students at the local school as well as at the more famous Carlisle school in Pennsylvania. Another chapter explores the role of religious communities during the exile. This is an important topic, as the religious groups played an essential role in the Nimiipuu return to the northwest. An initial group of widows and orphans returned in 1882 when an Idaho Presbyterian church voted to accept them into their community. In the end it was a memorandum submitted by Kansas Presbyterians that gained the attention of Congress, and in 1885 the Nimiipuu left the Oakland agency and returned home. The name “Oakland,” the focus of so much activity in the book, is no longer found on modern maps of Oklahoma; the reader’s ability to grasp the role of such places in the detainees’ relocation is limited by the book’s lack of maps. The only map in the entire book is a large-scale map showing the prisoners’ journey to and return from the Indian Territory. While the focus of the book is the Nimiipuu experience, the reader could better understand this experience if it were presented in a broader national context. For example, the Meeker Massacre of 1879 and subsequent relocation of the Colorado Utes receive no mention; it would be enlightening to have an occasional glimpse of how such incidents impacted, either positively or negatively, the public’s view towards the plight of the Nimiipuu as well as their effect on Federal policy. The book ends somewhat abruptly with a brief description of the remainder of Chief Joseph’s life. The Nimiipuu were resettled in two different areas, with religious affiliation being the prime determiner of who went where. The Nez Perces in the Indian Territory would be improved by a short epilogue that briefly shows how these communities fared and what contacts were maintained between them. In her foreword, Patricia Penn Hilden alludes to the Oklahoma Nez Perces—those Nimiipuu who married other Indians and stayed in the Territory—but no mention is made of the continued survival of this part of the Nimiipuu community. These limitations, however, do not seriously detract from the book; its central goal is achieved. Pearson’s portrayal of how the tribe maintained its identity and culture through a catastrophic and poorly-organized relocation admirably succeeds in making an important contribution to the literature on the Nimiipuu experience.