

Was It Worth Starting a War Over?

The Elfers-Beckröge Story

by Vic Berecz

On its surface, this is the life story of a striving pioneer who gained considerable wealth and success only to have his life snuffed out in its prime, and of his widow who, with grace and perseverance carried on for another half century. But, it's also a true-to-life tale of a free-wheeling time on the American frontier ... in this case, north-central Idaho ... when, for the last time in the United States, Native Americans clashed with white settlers in what were called the "Indian Wars" and in the process altered the future of this great land.

The focal point of this story is the "ambush murder" or perhaps the "justifiable homicide" of my wife's relative Henry Elfers. You see, in times of such conflict there are two sides to every story. But, motive aside, Elfers was no less dead! In this essay I'll emphasize such indisputable facts, sometimes ignore today's "political correctness" and try to convey both sides of the story. And, one indisputable fact is that the gunfire on the Elfers ranch the morning of June 14, 1877 signaled loud and clear the beginning of the "Nez Perce War" aka "Conflict of 1877."

The Indigenous Peoples of Idaho to 1877

The valley of the Snake River and its tributaries the Clearwater and Salmon Rivers is mostly high plateau country between the Cascades and the Rockies, in what are now northeastern Oregon, southeastern Washington, and north-central Idaho. This area was inhabited from time immemorial by a people who called themselves the *Nim-ii-poo*. About 1720, they first got horses and a new era was born with greatly expanded trade routes. Early French-Canadian fur traders were their first contact with Euro-Americans. These traders called them *Nez Perce* because some of them pierced their noses. In 1805-06, the Lewis and Clark Expedition wintered with them. At that time the various bands that made up the Nez Perce totaled about 6,000 people and spent their winters in permanent villages along the rivers and creeks, but in the summer traveled far and wide trading with their neighbors from the Pacific coast to the Plains, and hunting bison in Wyoming and Montana. They were outstanding horse breeders and their Appaloosas were much sought after by both white settlers and other native tribes.

The traditional beliefs of the Nez Perce included "wayekins" which were in essence personal guardian spirits. But, by the 1830s, Protestant missionaries had come to the area and the Nez Perce began to adopt Christianity. The U.S. gained undisputed jurisdiction of the region from Great Britain through the Oregon Treaty of 1846. Gradually, the 13-million acre tribal area of the Nez Perce began feeling pressure from white

settlers. The U.S. government in 1855 signed a treaty with the tribe giving them exclusive rights to, and protection for a 7½-million acre reservation shown in green on the map here, the remainder of the area they inhabited becoming public lands open to settlement. In 1863 the Idaho Territory was organized, encompassing Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, with a total population of only 17,000 settlers.

Unfortunately for the Nez Perce, gold was discovered on the Salmon River in 1860 and more than 5,000 greedy prospectors descended upon their reservation. One of them was Henry Elfers. The promised government protection never came. Rather, in 1863, the government "negotiated" or "coerced" some of the Christian Nez Perce



bands to sign a new treaty reducing the size of the reservation by 90% ... to the area shown in orange, which was entirely in Idaho. Many “non-treaty” bands refused to go to the new reservation and were left largely undisturbed for years. [Note: For ease of reading, I’m using the Indian’s English names in most cases.]

Over the years, disputes with white settlers led to the killing of several Nez Perce, including a Lower Salmon River chief named Eagle Robe. He was shot by settler Larry Ott in March 1874 in retaliation for throwing a stone at Ott. Often such killings did not result in prosecution, and that was the case with Eagle Robe’s murder. Tensions between the non-treaty Nez Perce and the settlers rose in 1876, and in May of 1877 Gen. Oliver Howard called for a council. At that pow-wow Chief Joseph of the Wallowa Band, whose home was in northeastern Oregon, spoke for all the non-treaty Nez Perce: “I will not go [to the reservation]. I do not need your help; we have plenty and we are contented and happy if the white man will just let 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 don’t need any help from you; we are free now; we can go where we please, our fathers were born here. Here they lived; here they died; here are their graves. We will never leave them.” Despite this eloquent plea, Howard ordered all non-treaty bands to move to the reservation, giving them only 30-days to comply. Joseph and the other chiefs decided military action would be futile, and began moving their people toward the reservation.

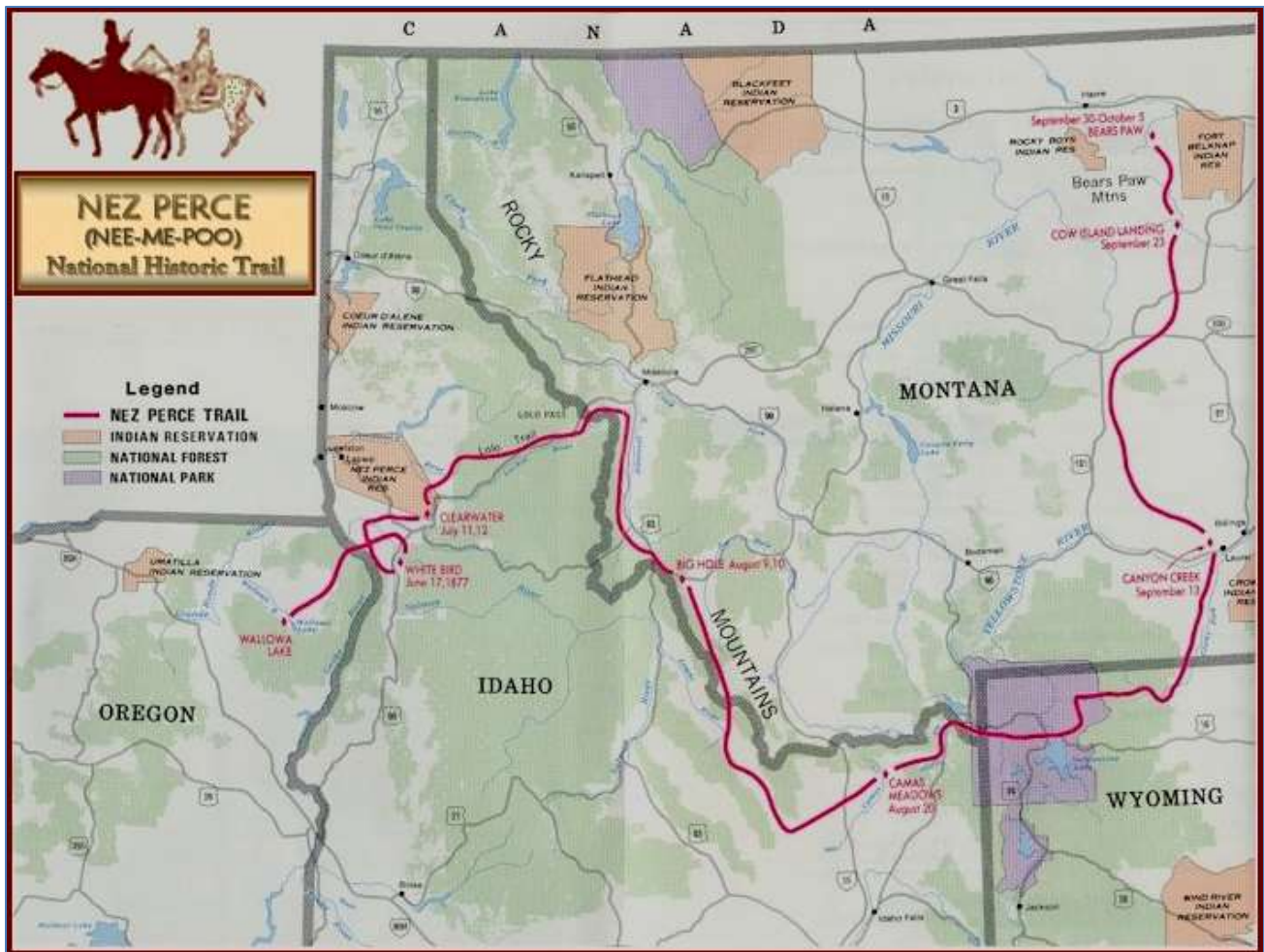
In early June, Joseph’s Wallowa Band was camped about six miles west of Grangeville along with Chief White Bird’s local Lower Salmon Band and other bands including that of Toohoolhoolzote ... about 250 braves, 500 women and children, and 2000 head of horses and cattle in all. Their intention was to have one last celebration of freedom before continuing to the reservation, on their own schedule and with dignity. We will discuss the events of June 13-16 in great detail later, but for now, let’s just say that 18 white settlers were killed by Nez Perce warriors, including Henry Elfers, and military conflict immediately began.

The “Nez Perce War” aka “Conflict of 1877.”

This “war” was essentially a 1200 mile strategic retreat through Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. On hearing of the massacre conducted by White Bird’s braves, Joseph and the other chiefs realized they could no longer go peaceably to the reservation. They decided to try to escape the area and seek refuge with the Crow Nation. When that strategy failed, they decided to run for Canada to join Chief Sitting Bull and his Lakotas, who had found refuge there after defeating Custer at Little Big Horn. Chief Joseph and many of the Nez Perce surrendered just short of the Canadian border. I will quickly summarize the Nez Perce War, since it’s not critical to our story.

The initial Battle of White Bird Canyon on June 17 was a significant defeat for the U.S. Army despite their numerical superiority. General Howard had dispatched two rather “green” companies of the 1st Cavalry to punish the Nez Perce for the massacre of the white settlers over the past few days. The troopers followed the Indians into the canyon of White Bird Creek. The Nez Perce sent out a peace delegation. The cavalry immediately fired on them and over 100 cavalymen plus some civilian volunteers rode headlong into the canyon. Seventy Nez Perce braves with only 40 old firearms, the rest with bow and arrows, met the extended column of cavalry well before they reached the main Indian camp. Captain David Perry, the senior officer, found he could not communicate commands to his troops because the trumpeter had lost his trumpet! The left flank, manned by civilian volunteers, collapsed. The troopers on the right flank fell back. Soon there was panic and a disorganized retreat. The two companies left 34 troopers dead and the Nez Perce captured over 100 modern carbines without a single Indian lost. Then the Nez Perce retreat began, as shown on the map on the next page. In early July, they were joined by the band of Chief Looking Glass from the Clearwater River area, who had been attacked by Gen. Howard though they were on the newly designated reservation. This brought the population of the fleeing Nez Perce to over 800.

After several non-decisive skirmishes in Idaho, at the suggestion of Looking Glass they crossed the Bitterroot Mountains. When the Nez Perce passed through the Bitterroot Valley without incident, they thought they had left the Army far behind. But while encamped in southwest Montana, their village of tipis was attacked by 200 cavalymen. Both sides suffered heavy losses here at the Battle of Big Hole on August 9-10 ... with many Indian women and children killed. The Nez Percé headed south with the army chasing them. They skirmished at Camas Meadow on August 20, and fled eastward across the new Yellowstone National Park.



On September 13 a contingent of the 7th Cavalry caught up with them at Canyon Creek just west of present-day Billings, Montana. Casualties were few in the battle, but in the next day's pursuit the Army, with the assistance of many Crow braves, captured 400 of the Nez Perce horses. The Crow betrayal put the Nez Perce retreat into high gear, heading directly north for Canada. After a skirmish with the small garrison at Cow Creek on September 25, the Nez Perce decided to slow their pace to rest their weakened people and horses. They were unaware that Gen. Nelson Miles had been dispatched with a combined force of cavalry and infantry.

Miles caught them on September 30 in a surprise attack in the Bear Paw Mountains. Chief White Bird, with about 100 members of his band and 300 horses, escaped Bear Paw and made it to Canada, joining Sitting Bull in Saskatchewan. Chief Toohoolhoolzote was killed at Bear Paw and after a several-day standoff, Looking Glass was killed. On October 5, Chief Joseph surrendered just 40 miles from the Canadian border.



Joseph is shown at left, Looking Glass at right, both in 1877 photos. It was here on the Bear Paw Battlefield that Joseph spoke his famous words: "Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever." Chief Joseph and over 400 prisoners were transported to Fort Leavenworth and then to exile in the Indian Territory. The 250 Nez Percé who survived there until 1885, were allowed to return to the Northwest. Chief Joseph refused to go to the Nez Perce reservation in Idaho. He settled at the Colville Reservation in Washington and died there in 1904.



The Elfers-Beckröge Family to 1877

Jürgen Hinrich Elfers was born in 1834 in the village of Daverden in the Kingdom of Hannover ... now Germany. Daverden and the adjoining village of Langwedel are situated about 15 miles southeast of the major city of Bremen. The two villages shared a Lutheran Church ... St. Sigismund in Daverden where we find the vital records for both the Elfers and Beckröge families. Hinrich, as he was known, was the youngest of the three children of Brüne Elfers and Adelheit Badenhoop. His father was a small farmer and owned Daverden house #13. His older sister, Anna Metta, married Dirk Hinrich Beckröge a landless farm laborer in Langwedel. His brother, Johann Harm would, as the oldest son, inherit the family farm, so Hinrich, who was an ambitious young man, had to look elsewhere for a future. News of the “California Gold Rush” had reached Germany by 1850, and so 16-year-old Jürgen Hinrich Elfers ... like many of his contemporaries around the world ... immediately set out for San Francisco with dreams of a golden future. The voyage around Cape Horn was long and arduous. But, Henry J. Elfers, as he was known in the U.S. was confident that he would have a prosperous future.

We know little about his years in California. From the only record mentioning him, the 1860 US Census, we learn that he was prospecting for gold in Salmon Township in what was then Klamath County ... it's now Humboldt County. We believe he and three other men were working a claim on Salmon Creek, a tributary of the Eel River... His partners, two Germans and a Swede, included John Wessel who was also born in Hannover. After apparently failing to *strike it rich* in California, and probably experiencing “the devastating effects of the *Great Flood of 1862* which swept away the riverside settlements, mining works, and ferries” (according to the history of Klamath County), he and Wessel and a third Klamath County prospector, Henry Mason, decided to move on to newer gold exploration sites on the Nez Perce Indian Reservation near what are now the ghost towns of Florence and Warren, Idaho.

At this point we should take a look at local Idaho geography, since many towns and villages, as well as rivers and creeks will be mentioned. On the present-day map below, we see that the Salmon River flows east-to-west between what in 1877 were the mining towns of Florence and Warren. They are now essentially ghost towns. At the present-day town of Riggins, the river turns abruptly northward, with route US 95 beside it. About three miles north of today's village of Lucile is where John Day Creek joins the Salmon River from the east. The present-day village of White Bird is where White Bird Creek enters the Salmon. Slate Creek, about three miles south of White Bird Creek was the location of a tiny settlement in 1877. Grangeville, now a sizable town, was then a tiny new settlement. About two miles to its southeast was the town of Mount Idaho, which was then the county seat of Idaho County, also now a ghost town. About five miles west of Grangeville, the Salmon River begins a loop to the west where it joins the Snake River. Grangeville is about 75 southwest of the city of Lewiston, on the Idaho-Washington border, where the Clearwater River enters the Salmon. Credit to *Google Maps*.



Elfers and his partners staked claims and prospected on the creeks along the Salmon River for a year. We know of at least eight claims in Henry Elfers name in the Washington Mining District (ie. the town of Warren). The *easy pickin'* alluvial gold in the stream-beds played out quickly, and by 1863 white prospectors were leaving for the new hot spots. Over the next two decades most of the early claims in that area were leased to Chinese who were much more patient in their work and expectations. Elfers, Wessel, and Mason left Philip Cleary to oversee their claims and mining interests in Florence and Warren. They bought land and built a ranch on 480 surveyed acres near where John Day Creek joined the Salmon River. On their ranch they established a hotel, a general store, operated a dairy with 200 cows, and ran a pack train over the mountain to the Florence mines. Mason sold out his share of the ranch and soon established a store and hotel of his own about three miles north of White Bird Creek. Wessel continued working with Elfers until he died in 1873. Cleary continued in his role in Florence, spending his winters at the John Day Ranch, until Elfers was killed in 1877.

In 1868, Elfers 17-year-old nephew Hinrich Beckröge came to New York and went west to work with him on the John Day Ranch ... in Idaho he was called Harry. Sometime in 1870, Elfers decided to go back to Germany to woo Catherine Beckröge and bring her back to America to be his wife.

Catherine Margaret Beckroge was born in Langwedel in 1845, the first child of Herman Hinrich Beckröge and his wife Anna Maria Lange. Since she was only a young child when Elfers left for America, we must assume that he learned of her much later from her cousin, his nephew, Harry Beckröge. She agreed to go to America with him, as would Harry's younger brother Brün. They returned to San Francisco aboard the same ship in which Elfers had traveled to Europe. According to family lore, the plan was that she would stay in San Francisco for a while with her uncle Johann Hinrich Beckröge, her father's half-brother. There she would learn English and otherwise acclimate herself to America before they would be married. Elfers and Brün returned to the ranch in Idaho.



Apparently that plan didn't work out, because Catherine wrote Henry that she was being mistreated. He immediately came to San Francisco for her. They were married at St. Paulus Lutheran Church, at the corner of Eddy and Gough streets in San Francisco, on October 16, 1871 by Rev. Jacobus Matthias Buehler. The notice of their wedding, as published on page 4 column 3 of the *San Francisco Morning Call* of October 21, 1871 along with their wedding photo are shown here. Soon after their marriage, the couple went back to his ranch in Idaho.



In the 1870s, there were other changes in personnel at the John Day Creek ranch. Harry Beckröge ended up in San Francisco, sick with tuberculosis ... perhaps going there for treatment. He died there on September 9, 1871, and was buried in Colma, just south of the city. For some reason, thereafter his recently-arrived brother Brün was always called Harry ... perhaps because they looked alike

... perhaps to "facilitate" becoming an American citizen. As previously noted, Elfers partner, John Wessel, died in 1873 and was the first person buried in the little cemetery across the creek from their ranch. Later, a young Irishman named Robert Bland was taken on as a hired hand at the John Day Ranch.

Also in the 1870s, the Elfers-Beckröge family grew. By 1877, there were three children: Adelaide "Addie" born 1872; Henry, Jr. born 1874; and Catherine "Kitty" born 1876 ... plus mother Catherine was pregnant with her fourth child, Elizabeth "Mamie" who would come into this world on New Year's Day, 1878. That was the situation at the ranch beside John Day Creek on the eventful day ... June 14, 1877.

The Events of the 13th to 16th of June 1877

On June 13, many of the non-treaty Nez Perce were still camped near Tolo Lake west of Grangeville. They were largely from two bands, White Bird's local group and Joseph's band that had come from Wallowa Lake, Oregon. Despite having only one day left before Gen. Howard's deadline for reaching the reservation, they decided to continue their celebration. The chiefs went off to slaughter cattle for the feast. The young braves staged a war parade. The place of honor at the end of such parades was usually given to two braves riding a single pony ... this time the honor fell to Shore Crossing and his cousin Red Moccasin Tops from White Bird's band. Shore Crossing was the son of Eagle Robe, who had been killed in 1874 by Larry Ott.

Supposedly, Shore Crossing was taunted during the parade by an elder for not having avenged his father's death. That insult, or more likely the liquor he imbibed after the parade, resulted in his decision to seek vengeance for his father's death. Red Moccasin Tops agreed to join the vendetta and they recruited a young nephew, Swan Necklace, to help them. That afternoon they set out, without a firearm, to kill Ott. They stopped by Harry Mason's store hoping to trade a horse for a new rifle ... Mason declined. On arriving at Ott's ranch they found that he was not there. They decided to seek out another hated white man, Richard Devine. Devine, who lived several miles up-river, had been accused of killing a crippled Indian and so would be a worthy substitute for their anger. On their way the Indians stopped at the John Day Ranch, and after a brief conversation with Catherine went on to Devine's cabin. That evening, leaving their horses with Swan Necklace, they entered the cabin, overpowered Devine who was still awake, and murdered him with his own rifle. They then decided to pay a return visit to Henry Elfers, who "had fine horses, and his heart had not always opened to the Nez Perce."

Early on the morning of the 14th, the Indians hid themselves along the path going from the ranch buildings to the pasture. As usual Elfers and his two helpers drove the stock to pasture. As each approached the place where the Indians hid, they were killed by Devine's rifle ... first Elfers, then Beckroge and Bland. During this time Catherine was busy churning butter at the milk-house alongside the rushing creek, so she did not hear the gunshots. The Indians then rounded-up Elfers finest horses, stole a rifle and ammunition from his house, and began their return to camp.

Along the way they encountered Charles Cone and warned him that the Indians were "on the warpath." Cone was good friend of the Nez Perce and a rancher in the little village at the mouth of Slate Creek. Cone "*took the Indians at their word and spread the alarm to other settlers in the immediate vicinity.*" The three warriors shot another man who they encountered. He was Samuel Benedict, who had two years earlier wounded Red Moccasin Tops. Benedict survived by "playing dead." The avengers then sent Swan Necklace ahead to camp to break the news. On hearing of the killings and seeing Elfers' fine horse and the rifle Swan Necklace now possessed, and with none of the Chiefs present to control the situation, it was easy to recruit a war party of seventeen young braves who would continue the massacre. All but one of this larger war party, led by Yellow Bull, was from White Bird's band.

In the meantime, a hunter named Whitfield heard the rifle fire at the John Day Ranch, hurried there and found the three bodies. Without telling Catherine, he went up the creek to Elfers' lumber mill. There he told Norman Gould, who operated the mill for Elfers, of his find and the men returned to the ranch. Catherine didn't believe that the three men had been killed until Gould brought the bodies to the ranch house. The men then took Catherine and her children to the safety of the settlement at Slate Creek.

On the afternoon of the 14th the Nez Perce warriors began their rampage, killing most of the men they encountered. Among the dead was Elfers' former partner Harry Mason. At first women and children were spared, but by the afternoon of the 15th the women who the warriors encountered were raped, and a few were even murdered. Three small villages ... Mount Idaho, Grangeville, and Slate Creek ... became places of refuge for ranch families where armed volunteers set up defenses. But, the Indians avoided armed men.

On the morning of the 16th, during a drunken foray by a small group of Nez Perce, one Indian was killed by white settlers. The party sent to recover his body killed one final white man they came upon named Charles Horton. Then the Nez Perce went into council. Two small bands from the Clearwater River area decided to return home, where they thought they'd be safe. The three remaining bands, under Chiefs Joseph, White Bird, and Toohoolhoolzote realized there could be no peaceful solution and began their escape march into White Bird Canyon at eight in the evening of June 16.

A 1903 biographical sketch describes Henry J. Elfers as “one of the earliest pioneers, a man of ability and courage, a loyal and patriotic citizen, a true friend and a devoted and loving husband. His untimely end at the hands of murderous Indians is one of the dark spots in the history of our county.” Another source describes Elfers as “another settler who had shown little friendship to the Nez Perce. [He] habitually sent his dogs to attack any passing Indians, and at the same time warned off any native passersby with his rifle.” I guess how you see a person depends on your perspective! Photos: Henry Elfers in 1875, and recent photos of the gravestones of Henry Elfers and Brun “Harry” Beckroge in the John Day Cemetery.



The Aftermath of the Massacre

As noted above, Catherine Elfers and her three young children were evacuated from the ranch to nearby Slate Creek. On the night of the 14th an Indian woman named Tolo went to the mining town of Florence where she told of the outbreak of violence. A dozen or so miners ... including Philip Cleary ... responded to the call and went to Slate Creek. One of these volunteers, William Wilson, had Civil War military experience. He supervised the building of defenses, principally a log stockade around the ranch buildings of Charles Cone. Here they were prepared to defend the Slate Creek settlers as well as the refugees, like the Elfers family, until there were assurances that the hostiles had left the area. A man named John Wood sent by courier a report to the *Lewiston Teller* newspaper on the situation at Slate Creek. As can be expected, it contains some inaccuracies, but it gives us an idea of the state-of-mind of those holed-up there in the days following the Nez Perce victory at White Bird Canyon. Here is that report exactly as published on June 20.

“Dear Sir. I send you an account of the murders and matters as they stand here [Slate Creek] at present. The Indians first killed Dick Devine on Salmon river above John Days. They then came down to John Days and killed Henry Elfres, Henry Backridge and Robert Bland. On the 14th they went around us on Slate Creek, and down the river and killed Harry mason, Mr. Osborne, French Frank, Sam Benedict, Capt. Baker, Jack Manual wife and one child. We can’t get below to bury them. We have sent above and buried the dead found above us on the river. We have here with us the following families: Mrs. Walch and her two children, Mrs. Osborne and her 4 children, Mr. and Mrs. Titman and 2 children, Wm. Rhett and his family, Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin and girl, Mrs. Elfres and her 3 children and mr. Sherwin and family. With the men who have come to our aid from Florence we have fifty men. We are fortified up, and we can hold the place even if [Nez Perce Indian Agent, John] Monteith was with the Indians. I see that about one third of the hostiles are reservation Indians. The rest are Joseph’s band and the Salmon rivers. We have sent for men and arms, but have not yet got them. If men cannot be sent, do send us guns and ammunition and we will save what we have left as long as our provision hold out, which may be 2 weeks, besides beef. The Indians have destroyed everything below and above us on the river. They are now driving Henry Elfres horses by here on the opposite side of the river. They are droiving the stock off and swimming it at Horse Shoe Bend, and ferrying all the goods and plunder they have taken from the settlers. It would make your heart ache to see the little

children walk here and sleep for 36 hours never cry except when you name Indians. We can't leave here, w have to guard day and night. The Indians say they have 300 or 400, and plenty of the best guns and ammunition. They took 33 sharp's rifles and cartridges from the soldiers [at the Battle of White Bird Canyon]. We have Indian Joe and family with us. You probably have the news from the prairie better than I can give it. Excuse haste, I am tired and sleepy."

As noted in that newspaper piece, on June 16, Philip Cleary and several others returned to the Elfers ranch and buried the bodies. They laid Elfers near a large weeping willow tree that grew by his bedroom window. Catherine Elfers



remained with her children at Slate Creek for six weeks, until the Nez Perce were long gone from the area. She then returned to the ranch with her children, and had the bodies disinterred from their burial sites and had them properly reburied in the little graveyard on the hill across the creek. At this time she hired Philip Cleary to operate the ranch on her behalf. At the right is a photo of the Elfers ranch on John Day Creek taken in 1891. This is probably much as it looked at the time of the massacre.

Philip Cleary was born in Tipperary, Ireland on March 3, 1838. We know nothing of his early life. As already noted, in the 1860s and 1870s he lived in Florence and oversaw Henry Elfers' mining interests there after Elfers bought the ranch. Cleary filed very many mining claims in Florence, so he was probably working as an agent for others as well. During the winters ... the slow season for mining ... he spent considerable time at the Elfers ranch. Beginning in 1870 he served several terms in as a representative of Idaho County in the Idaho Territorial Legislature. He was a Democrat and was last elected in 1886, winning by two votes, 67-65. After Idaho became a state in 1890 he ran for the legislature only once, being defeated by the Republican candidate in the election of 1894. In this 3-way race, over 1000 votes were cast showing the explosive growth in Idaho County around that time.

When Cleary took over responsibility for the operation of the Elfers ranch in 1877, he apparently still did not reside there full-time. He is listed in the 1880 US Census as a merchant living in a boarding house in Florence, and that census lists only Catherine and her four children living in the ranch house. But, seven years later on October 14, 1884, Philip Cleary married the widow Catherine Beckröge Elfers and presumably after that lived primarily at the ranch. The 1886 Idaho County tax records show that both Phil Cleary and Mrs. Phil Cleary were property owners in the county. So she retained title to the ranch, which was unusual for a woman at that time. On the 1908 tax records, long after she was widowed for the second time, the property owner is shown as Cleary and Elfers, so the ranch was by then jointly owned by mother and son.

Also in 1884, Catherine's youngest half-brother, Johann Hermann Beckröge (1864-1933) came to America to join her on the John Day Ranch. He was apparently schizophrenic (in that day called "*dementia praecox*") and it seems was a traumatic part of family life on the ranch. He was committed to an insane asylum in 1892 we learn from an item in the *Idaho County Free Press* of June 2nd of that year: "*On Monday and Tuesday an examination was held by Probate Judge Hall to inquire as to the sanity of John Beckroge. The complaint was made by Phil Cleary at whose place Mr. Beckroge has resided for some years. For some time past he has acted strangely and although he has never attempted to harm anyone the citizens of John Days were afraid that his insanity might at any time assume a dangerous phase. On the recommendation of the examining physician S.E. Bibby, he was committed to the asylum at Blackfoot.*" He was apparently moved to the Idaho State Hospital North in Orofino in 1904 where he was a patient the remainder of his life. He died there of chronic heart and kidney ailments in 1933 and was buried on hospital grounds.

By the end of the 1880s, most of the gold was played out and the population of Florence and Warren were greatly diminished. But, north-central Idaho was still a rather wild and sparsely populated frontier country with continuing Indian problems. In the December 2, 1887 edition of the *Idaho County Free Press* there was an editorial declaring that "*Indignant settlers are swearing vengeance against ... renegade hunting parties.*"

These were elements of Chief Joseph's band that had returned from Oklahoma, and were now permitted an annual off-reservation hunt. The article notes: *"They have been seen and recognized by many of the residents as the identical Indians who were engaged in the massacres of 1877. They have almost completely terrorized the few isolated residents of the little Salmon country by their insolent and hostile treatment. They have stolen and robbed and appropriated by force just what they pleased."* This was the environment in which the Elfers children were raised, but things were changing. In 1888 the "Salmon River Wagon Road" was completed with the construction of a bridge over White Bird Creek at a cost of \$750. This opened the area up to development and an influx of permanent white settlers with new economic opportunities.

Philip Cleary died in 1895 at the age of 57, and was buried in the John Day Cemetery. Interestingly, in 1917, Congress passed a bill providing a pension of \$20 per month to veterans of the Indian Wars (1859-1891) and \$12 per month to their widows. In 1923 Catherine Cleary filed a widow's pension claim stating that her late husband Philip served in Company B of the 2nd Idaho Territorial Volunteers during the Nez Perce War of 1877. I guess that came from his few days of service at Slate Creek. Following Cleary's death in 1895, Henry Jr. took over operation of ranch and the other Elfers businesses, though he was only 21 years old.

The 1900 census shows at least three homes on the Elfers ranch. Mother Catherine was living with her unmarried youngest daughter Mamie, and with daughter Kitty and her husband Tony Gordon. Henry Jr. was living with his wife Tola, their young daughter Rose, and two hired hands. In a third house lived three hired hands including Ellis Keiling, who married Mamie the next year. Oldest daughter Addie was living in Grangeville with her husband Bert Lanningham. The undated photo here shows the old John Day Ranch house that was in use in 1877. It burned in 1928.



A short 1903 biographical sketch of the Elfers family describes Catharine as *"a woman beloved by all who know her. She has ever manifested a charity and true sympathy to all who were in trouble and her kind acts and ways are well known by everybody. She is passing the golden years of her life amid many warm and devoted friends in the enjoyment of a competence that is justly hers."* Below is a photo of Catherine taken from that same book. She continued that good life ...

living on the John Day Ranch with her daughter Kitty and son-in-law Tony Gordon for three more decades.



At left we see a 1909 (partial) family photo. [L-R] in the rear are Bert Lanningham, Kitty and Tony Gordon, and Henry Elfers, Jr. In front are baby Elisabeth Gordon held by grandmother Catherine Beckröge Elfers Cleary, 10-year-old Rose Elfers, Tola Elfers, and 2-year-old Bellemetta Elfers. Ellis and Mamie were living in Washington. Was Addie taking the photo?



1909 was an important year for the Elfers family because Henry Jr. abruptly left the John Day Ranch, and bought land across the Salmon River between Cow Creek and what is now called Elfers Creek. There he established a sheep ranch. The rationale for the move was not explained to me, but I suspect it had to do with the arrival of the other mother-in-law, Mary Sams Brock Botsford. She lived with Henry and Tola the rest of her life.

The Elfers-Beckröge Children

The first child born to Henry and Catherine was Adelaide Louise (1872-1950). She was called “Addie.” At the tender age of 16 she married an older man, Albert Cassidy Lanningham (1859-1939), known as Bert. Bert was born in Nebraska, was orphaned early and cared for by a neighbor until he was 14 when he set off on his own. He worked his way west and ended up in Idaho in 1882. He worked the local ranches where he apparently met Addie. They married in 1889 in Lewiston. The newlyweds first went to Spokane, then to the coast, and back to Post Falls on the Washington-Idaho border where their first child was born and Bert worked in a shingle mill. In 1892 they returned to Grangeville. There he worked as a night watchman, stagecoach driver, and other odd jobs until, in 1899, his brother-in-law Henry Elfers, Jr. provided him the financial support needed to purchase a livery stable.



His 1903 biographical sketch says he: *“operates the Pioneer livery barn in Grangeville, which is the leading establishment of its kind in the town and is headquarters for some of the stage lines coming to Grangeville. Mr. Lanningham is a man of thorough business principles, handles his barn in a first class manner, having fine stock, excellent rigs and gives careful attention to the comfort and convenience of his patrons.”* Bert also owned mines in the Salmon River area. He and Addie lived the remainder of their lives in Grangeville. The photo shows them there in 1935. They had four children: Clarence (1891-1918), Laura (1894-1970); Albert Lester (1897-1979; known as Lester); and Mae (1900-1989) and three grandchildren.

Henry Jurdin Elfers (1874-1962) attended eight years of school in Grangeville before returning to work on the family ranch. On the death of his step-father in 1895, at the age of 21 he took over operating the ranch and the other family businesses. As probably the wealthiest rancher in the area, Henry immediately became a local leader and a trustee of School District #9.

That district’s school, 1½ miles up John Day Creek from the Elfers ranch, was a typical rural one-room schoolhouse where 16 students learned their 3-R’s. In 1890, a new teacher came to that school ... Capitola Brock (1872-1966). Tola, as she was called, was born in Iowa, lived in Dakota Territory with her widowed mother, and came to Idaho with her mother and step-father in 1883. She completed the 3-year teacher training program at Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA. She of course met the school district trustee, Henry Elfers, Jr. They were married on March 8, 1898 in Grangeville by Rev. T.D. Lewis, with his sister Addie and her husband Bert Lanningham as witnesses. The photo below was taken in 1898.

In his 1903 biographical sketch, Henry Jr. is described in this way: *“one of the leading stockmen of Idaho County. He lives near the Freedom [Slate Creek] postoffice, on John Day creek, where he owns a fine estate of four hundred and eighty acres, besides handling many acres of unsurveyed land. His skill, enterprise and integrity have amassed a good fortune for him and given him a first class standing in the county. ... He has been at the head of a large business since he was very young, and has displayed a sagacity and executive ability, which are very commendable. ... Mr. Elfers is a member of the IOOF., and is an active and well-informed Democrat.”*



Henry and Tola had six children, all girls; two died in infancy. Those who lived were Rose (1899-1992), Bellemetta (1907-1997), Pansy Henryola (1910-1990), and Catherine (1913-2000). There were six grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. When Henry reached age 70, he retired from ranching and he and Tola lived the remainder of their lives in the town of Riggins, Idaho.



Catherine Meta Elfers (1876-1955) was called “Kitty.” She was her mother’s namesake, and seemingly her favorite. She and Oliver Orien “Tony” Gordon (1870-1936) were married in 1900 at the then county seat, Mount Idaho, by Rev. W.N. Knox. Her mother and his brother Leroy were the witnesses. The couple and her twice-widowed mother lived together on the ranch in a separate house from Henry Jr. Tony worked on the ranch as a “farm laborer.” Their 1900 wedding photo is shown at left.

In 1909, when Henry Elfers, Jr. left the John Day Ranch, Tony Gordon took over its operation, which he continued until his death. Tony and Kitty had two children, Elizabeth L. Gordon (1908-1988) and Elfers O. Gordon (1910-1928), who died in an auto accident. Kitty and Tony had one grandchild. Kitty Elfers Gordon carried on the operation of the ranch for some years after Tony’s death. The 1940 US Census says she owned the ranch and operated it with her “partner” George Stevens and a hired man. We believe that George Stevens eventually bought the ranch from Kitty.

She retired to Grangeville. Stevens died in 1967 and is buried in the John Day Cemetery.

Elizabeth Marie Elfers (1878-1964) was born 3½ months after her father Henry was killed. She was called “Mamie.” In 1901 she married Ellis Henry Kieling (1873-1940). Their wedding photo is shown here. In 1900, Ellis was employed as a laborer on the Elfers ranch, where he lived in one of the out-buildings with other ranch hands. During most of the first fifteen years of their marriage they lived in his hometown of Chewelah, Washington. They then moved to Portland, Oregon where he initially worked for a construction company. Later he was employed by the city as a truck driver in the Street Department. They had two children: Kenneth Elfers Kieling (1902-2001) and Irma Robena Kieling (1912-1999) and three grandchildren.



Sources

In addition to the general historical knowledge of the era and area found on the Internet, mostly using Google and Wikipedia, and family-specific information found using the LDS Church’s genealogy website at *FamilySearch.org*, the information in this essay was primarily garnered from four sources. They are:

- 1) McDermott, John D.; **Forlorn Hope ... the Nez Perce Victory at White Bird Canyon**; Caldwell, ID; 1978. An updated and more “politically correct” version of an 1878 paper by the Idaho Historical Society. The new version was prepared by the U.S. National Park Service’s Historical Division as part of the development of the *Nez Perce National Historical Park*.
- 2) Western Historical Publishing Company; **An Illustrated History of North Idaho**, Spokane, WA; 1903. Short biographies of many residents of the area, including several Elfers family members.
- 3) St. Sigismund Lutheran Church; **Register of Births, Marriages, and Deaths**; Daverden, Hannover; 1715-1852. Using resources of the LDS Church’s Family History Library; microfilm #1188962-63.
- 4) **Previously Unpublished Family Photos, Mementos, and Lore**. These were principally provided by the late Jim Kohl (1934-2012), son of Pansy Henryola Elfers (1910-1990).