For the first 50 years of his life, Yellow Wolf preferred silence and solitude. As a boy, he journeyed alone into the mountains ringing Oregon's Wallowa Valley, fasting until animal spirits appeared and gave him his power as a hunter and warrior: to strike like thunder, to sense enemies from far away. The spirits instructed him to fight alone whenever possible during his first and last war, waged from June to October 1877 between the U.S. Army and several hundred Nez Perce families who resisted leaving ancestral lands for an Idaho reservation. Yellow Wolf was 21 during the Nez Perce War. In the decades that followed, while his uncle Chief Joseph drew large crowds for speeches about the injustice of his people’s plight, Yellow Wolf said nothing of his months in combat, not even to his children.

But he spent his last three decades in running conversation. Exiled with Chief Joseph’s band to the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington, he began spending summers in the Yakima Valley as a migrant hops picker, earning a dollar a box. On his way home to Oregon from a hunt in Montana, he carried enough money to perform at rodeos and fairs so he could interview them during off hours. To maintain off-season contact, he hired them to make feathered headdresses for movie studios and theater companies: some of the first filmed Westerns may have featured war bonnets made by Yellow Wolf. McWhorter also took Yellow Wolf on extended road trips to battlefields, so he could map the events of the war. And with every hops harvest, the two men would sit down and talk.

After 25 years of conversation, Yellow Wolf hoped he would live to see the book McWhorter was writing. Nearing 80 and frail, he understood the power of his words. The government, he told McWhorter, had “robbed us of all our country, our homes. We got nothing but bullets.” But the stories he had held onto created an unimpeachable claim to land, liberty, and equality. “White people… are smothering my Indian rights,” he said. “The young generation behind me, for them I tell the story. It is for them! I want next generation of whites to know and treat the Indian as themselves.”

He died five years before Yellow Wolf: His Own Story was published. McWhorter died in 1944, struggling to write a larger, more general history of the war. His papers went to Washington State University, which expected a few Indian artifacts for its “Treasure Room.” Instead, it received 26 linear feet of interview transcripts, correspondence, and other manuscripts about Nez Perce life, lore, and religion. The gift forced Washington State to change how it funded its library, and turned it, in essence, into a modern research university. The collection, rooted in Yellow Wolf’s words, is one of the most important archives of the Native American experience.
A portrait of Yellow Wolf circa 1909, and a snapshot taken in 1909 showing him seated between rancher Lucullus McWhorter and their interpreter, Thomas Hart, a younger Nez Perce man who had served in the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War and spoke good English.

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746