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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **INTERVIEW WITH EOU PROFESSOR EMERITUS GEORGE VENN FILMED FOR “OREGON EXPERIENCE”**

**LA GRANDE, Ore. (EOU)** – The story of one American soldier and his unprecedented friendship with a Nez Perce chief was quick to catch the attention of author George Venn.

That was 11 years ago, and today the professor emeritus at Eastern Oregon University is considered a leading academic in regard to U.S. Army Lieutenant Charles Erskine Scott Wood’s relationship with Chief Joseph, leader of the Wallowa Nez Perce band during the war of 1877.

Beginning in 1994, Venn reviewed over 90 historical sources, journals and drawings to complete his book, “Soldier to Advocate: C.E.S. Wood’s 1877 Legacy,” released in October 2006 (Wordcraft of Oregon).

The chronicles of C.E.S. Wood also intrigued Lawrence Cotton, an independent television producer and writer from Portland. Cotton is currently in the process of filming an episode of “Oregon Experience” to air on Oregon Public Broadcasting in 2008.

The program is part of a larger biographical project on the entirety of Wood’s life and will include information gathered from interviews with members of Wood’s family and the Nez Perce tribe. After “Soldier to Advocate” was published, Venn, who was involved as a consultant with Cotton’s project early on, was called upon again as a resource.

“George is one of two or three noted scholars on C.E.S. Wood, and for this part of Wood’s life, the Nez Perce war, Venn is an expert. His research has been terrific,” Cotton said.

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Cotton and his crew – John de Graaf, a filmmaker from Seattle, Randy Layton, and Greg Bond, both with OPB in Portland – arrived on campus in early August to interview Venn for the episode. The story of Wood’s first years as an Army recruit, his expeditions exploring the Northwest and how he came to know and understand the plight of American Indians unfolded in the Alumni Room with a small, bronze casting of Chief Alikut, brother to Chief Joseph, looking on.

“Wood painted a compassionate portrait of native peoples and collected stories from different tribes he visited,” Venn said. “He admired their individual freedom, their connection to nature and understanding of the world.”

For the on-camera interview, Venn related Wood’s conflicted interests as described in his poetry and prose written during Wood’s time in the military. Wood initially defended the initiatives of both his commander, General Oliver Howard, and Chief Joseph – a difficult position for a lieutenant to take during a time of military expansionism.

“Wood rejected the ideals of Manifest Destiny. He saw American Indians as fellow human beings and as a part of our common humanity,” Venn said.

In journals, drawings and other writings, Wood chronicled details of the Nez Perce war as it played out on the Western front. Venn’s book includes 18 of Wood’s original pen and ink drawings of battles, 40 additional 19<sup>th</sup> century images and 11 previously unpublished photos documenting the friendship and respect that was cultivated between Wood, Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce.

Venn’s commitment to cross-cultural literacy began in 1972 when invited elders from plateau tribes to address his Native American literature class at EOU. For the rest of his 32-year career as an English professor, Venn taught, encouraged and published American Indian students, writers and writing. His own publications also include poems about Coyote, a memoir on the Upper Skagit and a forthcoming address on the Nez Perce fire myth, “Beaver and the Grande Ronde River.” Upon his retirement in 2002, Venn received the Distinguished Teaching Award from EOU.

“Soldier to Advocate” is available for purchase at area bookstores or directly from the publisher, Wordcraft of Oregon, LLC, at [www.wordcraftoforegon.com](http://www.wordcraftoforegon.com). For more information about the “Oregon Experience” series visit <http://www.opb.org/programs/oregonexperience/>.

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