

Buffalo and the Salish & Pend d'Oreille People

By the Salish–Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee

The relationship with the buffalo lay at the heart of the traditional way of life of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille people. The elders tell of the respect for the buffalo, and of how much the people relied upon them, both spiritually and materially. They tell how the buffalo was their most important source of meat, of how great a gift the Creator gave the people in providing the buffalo. There are many stories of how the people risked their lives every year in going to buffalo, where there was the danger of battle with enemy tribes — a hazard which increased greatly in the nineteenth century, first with the introduction of firearms, then with reduction of the bison herds. For countless thousands of years before that time, the Salish and Pend d'Oreille people had lived in a sustainable relationship with the buffalo. When the first non-Indians arrived, they found the land covered with millions of bison — so many that they had difficulty believing that native people had lived here for so long.

“Going to buffalo” was part of the traditional cycle of life. The elders tell that when the wild roses bloomed in late spring or early summer, they knew that the buffalo calves were fat, and it was time to move east to hunt. The people would begin the journey as soon as they had dug their supply of camas.

After tribes throughout the region acquired the horse, the Salish and Pend d'Oreille would often be joined on their hunts by Spokanes and other tribes from the west. Before the horse, a number of Salish bands were based at places east of the mountains, such as Three Forks. Some Salish-speaking peoples closely allied with the Pend d'Oreille also lived east of the mountains, such as the now-vanished Tunaxn of the Sun River area.

The Salish and Pend d'Oreille developed a wide-ranging, complex trail system throughout their vast territories, and several routes connected the lands west of the mountains with the buffalo grounds to the east. Most often the people travelled up the Clark's Fork and Little Blackfoot rivers to Čłmlšé (the Helena area), and from there continued east to the Yellowstone and Musselshell country. Sometimes the Salish traveled east from the Hamilton area over the more rugged Skalkaho Pass. At other times, they went over through the Big Hole Valley. The Pend d'Oreille would usually travel by more northerly routes — via the passes at the head of the Blackfoot River, Badger Pass, or Marias Pass — moving to the clear plains near Great Falls and Shelby. At the Judith River treaty in October 1855, the Pend d'Oreille insisted on, and won, affirmation by the Piegans and others that they had always held aboriginal rights to hunt in the Sweetgrass Hills.

Until buffalo became scarcer, the people usually returned home during summer or early fall. In later times, some parties would stay through the winter on the plains. They relied on medicine men to help the people locate the increasingly scarce buffalo, and at times to break the bitter cold of plains winters when the very survival of the camp was threatened.

Elders have told in detail of the many ways bison were hunted. In the time before horses, the people utilized their intimate knowledge of the buffalo and the land itself to herd them over cliffs, the “buffalo jumps” such as those near Bozeman and Great Falls. In later times, buffalo were hunted from horseback using highly efficient and effective weapons, including lances, bows and arrows, and then guns.

Uses of the Buffalo

The respect held for the buffalo was reflected in the way the people used all parts of the animal and wasted nothing. This was central to the sustainability of the relationship between the people and the buffalo. It is difficult to find an account of buffalo hunting and the use of the buffalo by the elders where the lack of waste is not discussed. There are names in the Salish language for all of the cuts of meat and for all the inside parts. When the hunters went out, they would be followed by the best skinners in the tribe, and when the meat would be brought back to camp, the women would have the dry meat racks ready. They would work day and night for several days until all of the buffalo were taken care of. The meat would be dried, pounded, and then packed into parfleches, often mixed with mint leaves to deter bug infestations. Even the hooves were boiled for food. The people knew certain ways to prepare and bake the intestines and the organs. The brains would be prepared and stored, and could keep for as long as five years. The neck hide of the bulls would be formed over stumps and then used for buckets, or sometimes it would be made into strong ropes by cutting it into long strips and then pounding it with stone hammers. The hair of the bulls would be braided for horse halters or bridles. The bones would be chopped and pounded, and bone marrow would be extracted and stored in hollowed out elderberry branches, and later used for lubricating oil. The horns would be used for drinking cups or, in later times, for storage of gun powder. The robes were always taken care of and were highly prized for clothing and bedding. The scraped hides, after expert tanning, would be sewn together with great skill by the women to make lodges or tipis, which were known for their ability to keep cool in summer and retain warmth in winter. The ribs of the buffalo made excellent hide scrapers, and the sinew was valued for its strength as thread. Of course, the dried buffalo chips -- those over two years old -- would be gathered by the children and used for making fire in the camps on the treeless prairies.

When the parfleches were full, the women would inform the chiefs that they should stop hunting to avoid wasting anything, and the chiefs would then announce that they would be moving back to the west the next day.

The Pend d'Oreille Save the Buffalo from Extinction

The elders say that in the second to last year of the traditional Pend d'Oreille buffalo hunts, the hunters were able to kill only 27 buffalo. The following year, they killed only seven. The buffalo that had once blanketed the plains, and fed and clothed the people for thousands of years, were gone by the early 1880's.

Fortunately, however, the Pend d'Oreille had already saved the buffalo from total extinction. The elders have told how some years earlier, a man named Ataticé? (Peregrine Falcon Robe) , had proposed to the chiefs that the people herd some of the orphaned calves back west of the mountains to begin a herd on the Flathead Reservation. The people could see that the numbers of the buffalo were already declining, and inter-tribal conflicts over the dwindling resource were intensifying. But Ataticé? was suggesting a fundamental change in the traditional way of life. After three days in council, the leaders remained divided, so Ataticé? withdrew his proposal. In the late 1870's, however, the chiefs, seeing that the non-Indian slaughter of the buffalo would not stop, allowed Ataticé?'s son, Łatati (Little Peregrine Falcon Robe), to carry out the idea. About six calves survived the journey west. Some years later, Łatati's stepfather, Samwell, sold the herd to Michel Pablo and Charles Allard. Pablo and Allard ranged the buffalo in the grasslands along the Flathead River, where the herd quickly grew to hundreds of animals.

In 1896, Allard died, and in 1901 some of his portion of the herd was sold to the Conrad family of Kalispell. Other portions of the Allard herd were sold to Howard Eaton, a friend of Charles Russell. Eaton later sold his animals to Yellowstone Park. Thus the origin of the Yellowstone Park herd were in part the buffalo originally saved by Łatati.

After 1896, most of the herd continued to roam on the collective tribal lands along the Flathead River. But then, in 1904, Congress passed the Flathead Allotment Act, which would cut up the land into smaller parcels, and eventually throw open the reservation to non-Indian homesteaders. Though bitterly opposed by tribal people, the act forced Michel Pablo to round up and sell his herd. Unable to find an American buyer, he sold the herd to the Canadian government, and by 1908 some 695 buffalo had been rounded up and shipped by special train cars to Alberta. Some were too wild for the cowboys to catch, and when white poachers began to shoot them, Pablo told tribal members to hunt them for food.

In 1905, some wealthy non-Indians formed the American Bison Society in New York. In 1909, they convinced Congress in effect to seize over 16,000 acres of the Flathead Reservation in order to form a National Bison Range. A price for the land was dictated to the Tribes, who were given no power over the matter. Pend d'Oreille oral historian Blind Mose Chouteh told of the meeting that was held in St. Ignatius, where tribal leaders told the U.S. Indian Agent they did not want to give up that land, because it was some of their good hunting grounds. But the Agent told them they had no choice in the matter.

Big Medicine

In May 1933, a buffalo cow at the Bison Range — in all likelihood a descendant of the buffaloes that Łatati had rescued some sixty years before — gave birth to a white buffalo calf. The calf was named “Big Medicine” in recognition of his sacred significance. He died in 1959.