

Resources for Lessons

Salish Reading 1

The Salish and Pend d'Oreille of the Flathead Indian Reservation

Salish and Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee

*A long time ago...all over this land the people's medicine was put here...It was good!
Their home life was good, they were growing up in a good way, the children of the
long-ago people. The land was clean, the air was clean, everything was good.*

Mitch Small Salmon, 1978

The elders have told how our people, the *Séliš* (Salish or “Flathead”) and *Qlispé* (Pend d'Oreille or Kalispel), as well as the other tribes of the Salish language family, were originally one great Salish nation. Many thousands of years ago, the population grew too large for the people to stay in one place. They were running out of food, so they decided to split up. Some families or groups went in one direction, some in another. Over time, the many Salishan groups, reaching from Montana all the way to the Pacific Coast, developed into the distinct tribes of the Salish language family. The *Séliš* and *Qlispé*, who speak dialects that differ in only minor ways, are the easternmost of the Salishan tribes. *Qlispé* elder Pete Beaverhead said when this migration happened, the people moved from this area *čł išút* — downstream, to the west. A century ago, elders in eastern Washington State said that the Montana Salish spoke “the proper or purest dialect” and were regarded as “the head or parent tribe.”

The vast aboriginal territory of the *Séliš* straddled both sides of the Continental Divide in what is now the state of Montana. The aboriginal use area covered most of the state. Tribal occupancy of the region area reaches back to at least the end of the last ice age, some ten to twelve thousand years ago. Before the introduction of horses, non-native diseases, and firearms, the *Séliš* were organized in at least five major bands, based in such areas as modern-day Butte, Three Forks, the Big Hole Valley, and the Helena area. In more recent centuries, the *Séliš* were based in the Bitterroot Valley, and are therefore known to many people as the Bitterroot Salish. The majority of the Salish remained in the Bitterroot Valley until October 1891, when the government forcibly removed them to the Flathead Reservation on Montana's "Trail of Tears."

The *Qlispé* (Kalispel) are known in English as the Pend d'Oreille, a French term meaning something hanging from the ear, in reference to the shell earrings traditionally worn by both men and women. The *Qlispé* traditionally lived in a number of bands reaching up and down the drainage systems of the Flathead, Clark Fork, and Pend

Oreille rivers in what are now western Montana, northern Idaho, and eastern Washington. Non-Indians therefore called us the “Upper” and “Lower” Pend d’Oreille or Kalispel. Today, the upstream people, centered around the Flathead Reservation, are commonly referred to as the Pend d’Oreille, while the downriver people, based today on the Kalispel Reservation in eastern Washington State, are commonly known as the Kalispel.

For millennia, Salish-speaking peoples traveled this enormous area by foot and canoe, visiting and trading with each other, following a seasonal cycle of life and expertly gathering what we needed of the earth’s bounty; bitterroots, camas, buffalo, elk, deer, a wide range of fish, a great variety of berries and dozens of other foods and medicines. The Creator gave our people a rich land to care for and a varied and consequently stable supply of foods and medicines, and all materials necessary for a comfortable life.

The *Séliš* and *Qlispé* lived as hunters, gatherers, and fishers. We traveled across our vast territories with the seasons, harvesting a great variety of foods and storing them for the long winter months. Bison, deer, elk, moose, antelope, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, and other animals provided plentiful meat. We harvested many plants for food and medicine. The prairies were full of bitterroots, which we welcome each spring with prayer as the first of our important plant foods. In June, our moist high meadows turned blue with the blooms of camas, which were dug and then pit-baked in great quantities. In July and August the mountains were full of serviceberries, huckleberries, elderberries, chokecherries, and many other fruits. We managed our lands, and nurtured our abundant resources, with the careful and highly skilled use of fire, which had many beneficial effects, including increased forage for game, and revitalized berry patches and camas fields. The rivers, streams, and lakes of our territories abounded in fish, many of which played crucial roles in our traditional diet including *aay* (bull trout), *pist* (westslope cutthroat trout), *x^wy’ú* (mountain whitefish), *slaw’s* (largescale sucker), *čłeně* (longnose sucker), and *q^wo’q^wé* (northern pikeminnow). Salish and Pend d’Oreille people would also regularly travel west to fish for salmon or to trade with the salmon tribes.

We moved across the land in regular seasonal patterns times with the fluctuating supplies of plants and animals upon which we relied for food. Our ways of hunting, of fishing, and of gathering plants were based on a profound relationship with this place, on a detailed and precise knowledge –gained through thousands of years of living in one place- of the land’s short and long cycles of scarcity and abundance.

Salish and Pend d’Oreille culture, including its technology, was centered on a relationship of respect with all creatures. Almost every elder speaks of how, long ago, one of the central values of the traditional way of life was to waste nothing and to take

only what was needed. The elders most often speak of avoiding waste in relation to animals that were killed; by not wasting anything, the people showed respect for the animal, the one who gave its life so that the people might live. This same ethic also held true for plants, for berries, “for anything else they gathered or killed,” as Pete Beaverhead said. The commitment to avoiding waste helped ensure that the plants and animals we depend upon would be sustained for the generations to come. And so the people were never interested in developing the capacity – or the technology – to take or harvest huge surpluses.

The Salish and the Pend d’Oreille, and their tribal homelands were parts of a larger intertribal world, and interlocking system of nations and cultures. Tribes and bands of varying sizes occupied specific, if overlapping, territories. In the entire region, none of the tribes practiced agriculture to meet their subsistence needs, but they did develop regular relationships of trade and exchange with each other. Each relied primarily upon the foods that were abundant in that particular area- those foods that were given to each particular people for their sustenance and their survival. Foods or materials found in great abundance or high quality in the territory of one tribe would be exchanged with “specialties” from other tribes and places. When the Salish tribe traveled west, for example, we might trade our camas or finely tanned deer hides for dried salmon from the Okanagan or Spokane. Sometimes people would exchange foods through formal intertribal gatherings and gift-giving ceremonies. At other times, then as now, they would simply exchange in informal gift-giving or trading and bartering between individuals and families. So, while the tribes were largely self-sufficient, they aided and supported each other through these systems of exchange.

The intertribal world that emerged after the dispersal of the great Salish nation was not a world fixed in stone, not a world without historical change. People constantly made innovations. But our elders have said that the fundamental basis of our way of life remained essentially stable until the great changes of the last five centuries. Indeed, the disruption and losses of those more recent centuries have undoubtedly erased from our oral traditions knowledge of some of our earlier history. But we know that there was also great stability in our relations with this land, with the plants and animals, and with our neighboring tribes before the arrival of horses and European diseases. Around the world, countless nations and empires rose and fell during that time. But the sqelix^w – the people – respecting the earth and living within its limits continued and flourished.

The Salish at the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

Tribal territories changed dramatically in the late 1700s, as epidemics of smallpox and other non-native diseases took a devastating toll, and as the Blackfeet gained access to

firearms through the Hudson's Bay Company. The Plains Salish and Kootenai relocated their winter camps west of the mountains. A Salishan people called the *Tunáxn*, who lived east of the Continental Divide along the Rocky Mountain Front and adjoining areas, were eliminated as a distinct tribe by repeated Blackfeet attacks. The few survivors joined neighboring tribes, including the *Sélis*, *Qlispé*, and Kootenai. Our tribes continued to utilize our old easterly territories for hunting bison and other purposes, usually making two or more trips per year over the mountains. By the mid-1800s, as fur traders provided tribes west of the mountains with access to guns, the western tribes regained military parity with the eastern tribes.