



Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes

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SALISH CULTURE

Salish Elders say that they, and many other tribes, were placed on this earth as one Salishan-speaking people. but they separated thousands of years ago into different bands. These individual bands then became separate tribes in different parts of the Northwest. eventually speaking different dialects of the Salish language. Their migration route extended from British Columbia to the present-day states of Washington, Idaho, Montana and beyond.

Several large bands of Salish (later misnamed Flatheads) camped throughout Montana from the Bitterroot to the Yellowstone Valleys; however, encroachment from non-Indians led to the eventual concentration of the tribe in the Bitterroot Valley. The Pend d'Oreille settled in the Flathead Valley. A bank of Kalispel, according to the late Mitch Smallsalmon, camped along the Flathead River near Perma and then at Camas Prairie.

People were a part of the environment, traveling and living. They didn't separate themselves from the natural world but were a part of it. Everything was in order.

At night during the winter months, the Elders of the tribes related coyote stories about their ancestors to eager listeners both young and old. These narratives explained natural phenomena and illustrated moral principles such as how the world came into being, the history of the tribe, past leaders, heroes and relatives, and practical things such as how to make items needed in camp. Most importantly, these narratives taught the children to be respectful listeners so that they could understand the lessons of their lifestyles and pass them on to future generations. Once of these narratives follows:

The Salish Creation Story

According to Salish legend, our story began when the Creator, the Maker, put the animal people on this earth. The world was not yet fit for mankind because of many evils, so the Creator sent Coyote first --with his brother Fox-- to this big island (as the Elders call this land) to free it of evils. The brothers were responsible for creating many geological formations and for providing special skills and knowledge for mankind to use. However, Coyote --being Coyote-- left many faults such as greed, jealousy, hunger, envy, anger and many other imperfections that we know of today.

At the core of this story is the fact that we are all made by the Creator, and we must respect and love each other. All creation consists not only of mankind, but of all creations in the animal world, the mineral world, the plant world-- All elements and forces of nature. Each has a spirit that lives and must be respected and loved.

The Elders tell us that Coyote and his brother are at the edge of this island, this land, waiting. When Coyote and Fox come back through here, it will be the end of our time. the end of this part of the universe if we do not live as one creation-- all part of

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one big circle. We must always work or a time when there will be no evil, no racial prejudice, no pollution, when once again everything will be clean and all will be beautiful for the eye to behold-- a time when spiritual, physical, mental, and social values are inter-connected to form a complete circle.

--Salish Culture Committee

Economy & Government

The Salish tribes gained their substance from a tribal system of hunting, fishing, and harvesting. Their quest for food began with root digging in the early spring, with bitterroot as the primary food. Tribal leaders would appoint a few well-respected Elders to watch and notify them when the Bitterroot was ready. The leaders would then call the people together to gather the first roots for a feast to celebrate the harvest of the year's first food and to pray that food would be plentiful throughout the year.

The people then gathered roots and plants such as camas bulbs, tree moss, onions, Indian potatoes, and carrots throughout the growing period. (Plants were also collected for medicinal use.) The people hunted and fished, especially for trout and salmon, in the early summer. Berry picking supplemented root digging --the first berries picked were strawberries and service berries, then huckleberries, raspberries, chokecherries, and Hawthorne berries.

in late fall, the men concentrated on hunting while the women dried meat and prepared hides for robes and buckskins. People hunted many different animals for food and clothing, although staples were deer and bison. As with fishing and plant gathering, hunts were often conducted communally. Every year, the people would travel to areas east of the mountains where deer and bison were plentiful.

When the Indians are going to hunt, they have a head leader called a (situs). There will be many, many young men. And when the Indians move from their regular homes and get all their camps set up, they would have their horses all herded back. Everyone at camp was afoot. Then it will be agreed that a certain place was where they will hunt in the morning.

The next morning the men go to this place. It might be a wide place in a draw. They would say, "this one particular draw or canyon is where we will hunt." ...They killed around a hundred deer. The didn't kill them all and they turned the rest loose. The children who were old enough and also the woman went along to drag the deer back to camp... it was really something to see... Over towards the Deer Lodge country was where the deer is plentiful.

The Indians did this type of hunting until there was enough meat supply to last them a long time. Then the Indians went back after their horses, which they herded back to their regular homes.

My father was with this group of Indians when they went hunting. He was the one who told me this story.

-- Pete Beaverhead, Pend d'Oreille Elder, 1975

After any group hunt, the meat would be divided up equally among all people in the camp. the cut meat would be piled in one place, and each lodge would take what they needed, the unlucky hunters as well as the lucky ones. All parts of the animals were used; nothing was wasted.

Winter months were spent trapping and fishing. Women spent much time repairing clothing and sewing new garments during this season; clothing was made from deer and elk skins and decorated with porcupine quills colored with natural dyes.

Each tribe had a leader or leaders who governed by consensus, and who were guided and advised by large numbers of respected elders. These chiefs were chosen for qualities such as wisdom, intelligence, courage, compassion, generosity, and humility. Different leaders had particular strengths or skills, and would be appointed to lead different activities such as hunting, camp activity and war. As Pete Beaverhead said, *"In most of the stories there are three big chiefs, above all the rest of the people. They are all regarded with the same respect. None of them are higher*

then the other two. This is among the [Pend d'Oreille] Indians. Then the smartest warriors are right behind them; there were always very many of these men."

Lodging, Transportation, Recreation and Trade

The earth was good to these Salish-speaking tribes, provided not only an abundance of food, but also raw materials for making lodges, tools, clothing, and games. Coverings for the lodges came from elk, or buffalo; tools such as needles, mauls and grinding stones were made from wood, bone and rock. The tribes would travel to an area to gather a specific material to make a tool or item for family or personal use.

Before the horse was introduced to the region, travois were used to haul bundles to the next camp. These travois were built of two poles which bore a net or skin on which the bundle was tied. Teepee poles would always be left behind at the camp for use by the next tribe or family to camp there.

There was always time set aside during the week to visit and play games. Shiny and hoop and dart were two of the favorite games. Celebrations were part of life, such as after battles and successful hunts. Songs and dances were interwoven into the lifestyles of the Salish-speaking tribes. Felicite McDonald, a Salish Elder, recalled that people would walk to each lodge singing a wake-up song each morning.

The Salish had a strong trade relationship with the Nez Perce. They would trade bitterroot and their high quality buckskin for the beautiful Nez Perce Indian hemp baskets which would be filled with camas.

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