

Séliš (Salish or "Flathead") and *Qlispé* (Kalispel or Pend d'Oreille)

by the Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee, 2015

In winter time, our elders tell the oldest stories of tribal history: the *sq^wllum̓t* — the sacred stories of the creation and transformation of the world and its creatures. They tell of *Snč̓lé*, Coyote, who traveled across the land, killing the *nałisq̓elix^wtn* — the people-eaters or monsters. Coyote prepared the world for the human beings who were yet to come. Then came the *x̓^wl̓cm̓úsšn* — the ancestors. Tribal occupancy of the region reaches back to at least the end of the last ice age, some ten to twelve thousand years ago.

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 is̓út* — 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. Before the introduction of horses, non-native diseases, and firearms — when tribal populations were many times larger — the *Séliš* were organized in at least six major

bands, based in such areas as modern-day Butte, Three Forks, the Jefferson Valley, Big Hole Valley, and the Helena area. In more recent centuries, the *Séliš* were concentrated in the part of their overall territory that included 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* are known in English as the Kalispel, and also 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 many bands — originally, probably eleven bands — reaching up and down the drainage systems of the Flathead, Clark Fork, and Pend Oreille rivers in what is now western Montana, northern Idaho, and eastern Washington. Non-Indians therefore called us the “Upper” and “Lower” Pend d'Oreille or the “Upper” and “Lower” Kalispel. Today, the upstream people, centered around the Flathead Reservation, are commonly referred to as the Pend d'Oreille, while the downstream people, based today on the Kalispel Reservation in eastern Washington state, are commonly known as the Kalispel.

The old name for the Pend d'Oreille band of the Flathead Lake and Mission Valley area is *Stqetk^wmsčint*, which means People Living along the Shore of the Broad Water. This is because they were based around *Čtqétk^w*, meaning Broad Water — the Salish name for Flathead Lake.

Our tribes and populations suffered heavy losses 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. Tribal territories changed dramatically. The Plains Salish and Kootenai relocated their winter camps west of the

mountains. A Salishan people called the *Tuñáxn*, who lived east of the Continental Divide along the Rocky Mountain Front and adjoining areas, with bands based along the Sun River, Dearborn River, and near Great Falls, were eliminated as a distinct tribe by repeated Blackfeet attacks as well as disease. The few survivors joined neighboring tribes, including the *Séliš*, *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 Continental Divide. 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.

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, the 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^wyú* (mountain whitefish), *sláws* (largescale sucker), *čteñe* (longnose sucker), and *q^woq^wé* (northern pikeminnow). *Séliš* and *Qlispé* people would also regularly travel west to fish for salmon or to trade with the salmon tribes.

At the center of tribal cultures lay a deeply ingrained ethic of reciprocity between people, and between people and the land. We lived by a shared sense of what was appropriate and right in our relations with each other and with the earth. Over such a vast tenure on the land, the *Séliš* and *Qlispé* doubtless experienced historical changes that are beyond our knowledge today, including changes in climate, fluctuations in the availability of various foods, and the inevitable ups and downs in relations between tribal nations. But for a very long time, our way of life, rooted in our spiritual relationship with our environment and careful stewardship of our resources, provided a dependable sustenance to countless generations.