



Q̓w̓eyq̓w̓ay

Buffalo and the Séliš & Q̓lispé People

by the Séliš-Q̓lispé Culture Committee

ǫ^weyǫ^way: Buffalo and the Séliš & Ǫlispé People

The relationship with ǫ^weyǫ^way (buffalo) stands at the heart of the cultures of the Séliš (Salish) and Ǫlispé (Kalispel or Pend d'Oreille) people. The elders tell us that it is a relationship rooted in our Creation stories, and in our spiritual obligation to all the plants and animals for giving us sustenance and life. In the traditional way of life we practiced for many thousands of years, we relied upon buffalo, both spiritually and materially. We still depend upon them today. Our lives, ǫ^weyǫ^way and sqélix^w (human beings), have always been intertwined.

Our territories straddle the Continental Divide, encompassing many of the areas that were most abundant in bison. For the vast majority of our history, our people were centered in the heart of buffalo country, with large Séliš bands based in places such as Čłmłšé (Helena area) and Sk^wumčné (the Big Hole). Another Salish-speaking people who were closely allied with the Ǫlispé, the now-vanished Tuñaxñ, also lived east of the mountains, with large bands in the Sun River-Dearborn River-Great Falls areas. Well into the nineteenth century, there were also smaller numbers of buffalo in those portions of our territories that lay west of the Divide.

When the first non-Indians arrived, they found the land covered with millions of bison—so many that they had difficulty grasping that native people had lived here for a very long time. They did not understand that for thousands of years, we had lived in a relationship of respect with ǫ^weyǫ^way, taking what we needed but ensuring that they would be plentiful for the generations yet to come.



Séliš elder Eneas Vanderburg, Elk Creek Buffalo Jump 2006. Photo by Tim Ryan.



Bison herd, 1853, North Dakota. J. M. Stanley, from Isaac Stevens, Report on Northern Route of the Transcontinental Railroad.

The Great Changes of the 1700s

During the 1700s—the century preceding the arrival of the first non-Indians—the Indigenous world of this region was reshaped by three major forces: horses, which our people adopted around 1700; non-native diseases such as smallpox, which had devastating impacts, including the loss of more than three-quarters of our people during the epidemic of the early 1780s; and firearms, which were acquired by some of our tribal adversaries more than 30 years before our ancestors gained access to them through fur trader David Thompson. In response to these great changes, our ancestors decided to consolidate our main winter camps into the westernmost portions of our overall territories.

Going to Buffalo

The Salish and related tribes never surrendered our easterly territories and continued hunting buffalo. Using horses, “going to buffalo” became part of our traditional cycle of life during the 1700s. The elders tell that when wild roses bloomed in late spring or early summer, they knew that the buffalo calves were fat, able to survive on their own, 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.

The Séliš and Q̄lispé would often be joined on our hunts by Spokanes and other tribes from the west. We had a wide-ranging, complex trail system throughout our vast territories, and several routes connected our homelands east and west of the Continental Divide. Most often, the people traveled up Nc̄q̄w̄el̄stét̄k̄w̄ (the upper Clark Fork) and Little Blackfoot rivers to Č̄łm̄l̄š̄é (the Helena area), and from there continued east to Č̄x̄w̄ m̄in Sew̄łk̄w̄s (Yellowstone River) and Ep̄ł Č̄liiyalsálq̄w Nt̄x̄w̄et̄k̄w̄s (the Musselshell). Sometimes the Séliš traveled east from the Hamilton area over the more rugged S̄q̄x̄q̄x̄ó S̄x̄w̄cu?sí (Skalkaho Pass). At other times, we went via Sk̄w̄um̄cné (Big Hole). The Q̄lispé would usually travel by more northerly routes—over passes at the head of Naáyc̄stm Sew̄łk̄w̄s (the Blackfoot River), Badger Pass, or Q̄lispé S̄x̄w̄cu?sí (Marias Pass)—moving to the clear plains near N̄č̄tx̄s̄š̄né (Great Falls) and Č̄čāłalq̄n (the Sweetgrass Hills). At the Judith River treaty in October 1855, the Q̄lispé insisted on, and won, affirmation by the Piegans and others that we had always held the right to hunt in that area.



Territories of the Salish, Kalispel, and Related Nations (the Tunáxn and S̄m̄teúse? no longer exist). Boundaries of Flathead and Bitterroot Reservations as defined in 1855 Hellgate Treaty are outlined in orange.



Séliš elder Louie Adams and Lloyd Irvine prepare to sing the traditional buffalo-calling song, First Nations Buffalo Jump, 2006

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. We relied on medicine people to help us locate both the increasingly scarce buffalo and enemy tribes, and at times to break the bitter cold of plains winters when the very survival of the camp was threatened.

Methods of Hunting

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 Buffalo

The respect held for 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 people and buffalo. It is difficult to find an account of buffalo hunting and the use of the buffalo by the elders where the avoidance 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. Even the hooves were boiled for food. The people knew certain ways to prepare and bake the intestines and the organs. Brains were prepared and stored, and could keep for as long as five years. Buffalo ribs made excellent hide scrapers. The sinew was valued for its strength as thread. The thick neck hide of bulls was formed over stumps to fashion into buckets, or sometimes was used to make strong ropes by cutting long strips which were pounded with stone hammers until soft and flexible. The hair of the bulls was braided for horse halters or bridles. Bones were chopped and pounded, and bone marrow was extracted and stored in hollowed-out elderberry branches, and later used for lubricating oil. Horns were used for drinking cups or, in later times, for storage of gun powder. The robes were always taken care of and were highly valued for clothing and bedding. The scraped hides, after expert tanning, were 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.



Stm̓xe Q̓w ox̓w qeys (Claw of Small Grizzly—Chief Charlo). Very few men held the right to wear a qeysqn (buffalo headdress).



Séliš elder Paul Antoine demonstrates braiding buffalo bull hair, 1935. C. E. Schaeffer, American Museum of Natural History, NYC.

When a hunting party made camp on the treeless prairies, children were tasked with gathering dried buffalo chips—those over two years old—which were used for making fire. The hunters went out, followed by the best hide skimmers in the tribe. When the meat was brought back to camp, the women would have the drying racks ready. They would work day and night for several days until all of the buffalo were taken care of. The meat was dried over the buffalo-chip fires, pounded, and then packed into parfleches, often mixed with mint leaves to deter bug infestations. 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 the next day.

The Q̄lispé Help Save Buffalo from Extinction

The elders say that in the second-to-last year of the traditional Q̄lispé 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 mid-1880s.

Fortunately, however, the Q̄lispé had already taken action to save the buffalo from total extinction. The elders have told how some years earlier, the people could see that the numbers of the buffalo were declining, and inter-tribal conflicts over the dwindling resource were intensifying. A man named Atatíćé? (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. But Atatíćé? was suggesting a fundamental change in the traditional way of life and our relationship with q̄weyq̄way. After three days in council, the leaders remained divided, so Atatíćé? withdrew his proposal. In the late 1870's, however, the chiefs, seeing that the non-Indian slaughter of the buffalo would not stop, allowed Atatíćé?'s son, Susep Łatatí (Joseph Little Peregrine Falcon Robe), to carry out the idea. About six calves survived the journey west. Some years later, Łatatí's stepfather, Samwell, sold the herd to Michel Pablo and Charles Allard. Pablo and Allard ranged the buffalo in the grasslands along Ntx̄wétk̄w (the lower Flathead River), where the herd quickly grew to hundreds of animals. Supplemented by the purchase of additional buffalo from other private herds, the Flathead Reservation herd grew to about a thousand animals, probably the largest surviving herd in the world at the time.



Buffalo skulls stacked for rail shipment, southern Alberta. Glenbow Institute, Calgary.

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 Charlie 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 Susep Łatati.

After 1896, the herd continued to roam the collective tribal lands along the Flathead River. But in 1904, Congress passed the Flathead Allotment Act, despite fierce opposition from the tribal community. The act cut up the land into parcels, and made much of the reservation available to non-Indian homesteaders—in direct violation of the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, which had guaranteed the reservation for the Tribes’ “exclusive use and benefit.” The act forced Michel Pablo to round up and sell his herd. Unable to find an American buyer, he sold his bison to the Canadian government. By 1908, some 695 buffalo had been rounded up and shipped by special train cars to Alberta. Some



Clockwise from top left: Susep Łatati, 1906. Boos photo, Denver Public Library.

Séliš-Qłispé Culture Committee elders, staff, and friends, Madison Buffalo Jump, 2015.

Bison roundup, Flathead Indian Reservation, 1906. Montana Historical Society.



were too wild for the cowboys to catch. When white poachers began to shoot them, Pablo told tribal members to hunt them for food. The last seven buffalo were shipped out of the Ravalli train depot on June 1, 1912.

During this same time period, wealthy New Yorkers had formed the American Bison Society. In 1909, they convinced Congress to seize 18,523.85 acres of the Flathead Reservation in order to form a National Bison Range. The Government dictated a meager price to the Tribes, who were given no power over the matter. Q̄ispé oral historian Mose Č̄awte (Chouteh) told of a meeting 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 our good hunting grounds. But the Agent told them they had no choice in the matter. The government, having just evicted a tribal herd from the reservation, was now taking tribal land to form a herd under their control.



Ipiq Q^weyq^way — White Buffalo

In May 1933, a cow at the Bison Range gave birth to a white buffalo calf. For many Séliš and Qlispé people, Ipiq Q^weyq^way—White Buffalo—was something powerful. Some came to call it “Big Medicine” (in Salish, Sk^wtiłmaliyemistn). After the white buffalo died in 1959, it was taxidermed and taken to the Montana Historical Society. Since that time, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes have been trying to bring Ipiq Q^weyq^way home to its birthplace, an effort that continues today.



McKay photo, University of Montana Mansfield Library Archives & Special Collections.

Bison Range Restored to Tribal Ownership

In 2020, Congress passed Public Law 116-260, which restored the Bison Range to federal trust ownership for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. After more than a century of dispossession, this land has been returned to tribal control. The CSKT’s award-winning natural resource managers have taken over as caretakers of the Range’s buffalo, wildlife, and land. We will carry on for the generations yet to come our ancient relationship of respect and reverence for q^weyq^way.



SQCC Director Tony Incashola interviewing Séliš elder Felicite “Jim” Sapiye McDonald about her knowledge of q^weyq^way, *Snyelmn Usšnétx^w* (St. Ignatius Longhouse), 2015.



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