

Flathead Indians

The Flathead Indians belong to a group known as the Salish-Kutenai, which also includes the Kalispel, or Pend d'Oreilles, and the Kutenai. The Flathead and Kalispel share the same Salish language, and the Kutenai have their own. The Flathead tribe originated on the plains, as far east as Three Forks, but migrated west into the river valleys of the western mountains, pushed by their enemies the Shoshoni and the Blackfeet. The Salish-Kutenai tribes are also known as Plateau Indians, since they lived on western plateaus.

The Plateau Indians had a culture very different from the nomadic Plains Indians. Up until the 1840's the Flatheads hunted buffalo in the western valleys, but after the buffalo disappeared they lived mainly on fish, camas roots and bitterroots, berries, and small game. They made several trips each year to the east to hunt buffalo, but would return across the Divide to be safe from the Blackfeet and other enemies.

One of the first encounters with white men came when a group of Flathead Indians met the Lewis and Clark Expedition in the Bitterroot Valley in 1805. The Indians were very friendly and traded horses to the Expedition. Lewis and Clark said in their journals that they thought the Flatheads had the strangest language they had ever heard.

In 1807, the trapper David Thompson of the Northwest Fur Company established a profitable fur trade with the Flathead, Kalispel, and Kutenai Indians. He built the Kootenai House near present day Libby, Montana in 1808, and the Saleesh House near present-day Thompson Falls in 1809. The Indians first became acquainted with white civilization through the trade goods they received trading beaver pelts. In addition to trade goods such as blankets and guns, they learned about liquor and the white man's disease, smallpox.

In 1831 the Flatheads sent a delegation to St. Louis to find Jesuit priests, or Black Robes, who would come to teach them Christianity, which they had learned about from French-Canadian trappers. In 1841, Father Pierre Jean DeSmet, a Jesuit priest, established the St. Mary's Mission in the Bitterroot Valley. In 1845, a priest named Father Ravalli came to St. Mary's, which became a thriving community with a saw mill and a grist mill for grinding flour. Father Ravalli also inoculated the Flatheads with smallpox vaccine.

In 1846, Father DeSmet tried to spread Christianity to the traditional enemies of the Flatheads, the Blackfeet, afraid that it would give the Blackfeet more power over them. Also, the Flatheads did not receive annuities promised to them by the government. For these reasons,

the Flatheads and priests began to distrust each other, until in 1850, the priests decided to close down the St. Mary's Mission.

In 1855, a man named Isaac Stevens came through the Indian territory searching for a route for a railroad. The Flathead, Kutenai, and Pend d'Oreille tribes met with Stevens and agreed to live on a large reservation called the Jocko Reservation south of Flathead Lake. This reservation was acceptable to the Pend d'Oreilles and Kutenai, but the Flatheads refused to move from the Bitterroot Valley.

In the early 1870's, the government decided that the Flatheads must move to the reservation, because they were under pressure from the white settlers who wanted more land. Two Flathead chiefs, Arlee and Adolphe, agreed to move, but Chief Charlot refused. He stayed with his band in the Bitterroot Valley for the next twenty years, until in 1891 he was finally forced to give his land up for sale and take his band of 157 Indians, with their horses and all their material possessions, and travel through Missoula to the Jocko reservation.

In 1904, under pressure from whites who wanted the land and by 1909 the government had given each Indian an allotment of 80 acres of farmland or 160 acres of grazing land. The rest of the land was opened to settlement. In 1910, the Indians were permitted to sell their land down to

20 acres, and as a result, much of the reservation is now owned by non-Indians.

The Jocko Reservation is now called the Flathead or Salish-Kutenai Reservation. The center of the reservation is the town of Ronan.