

Going to Buffalo: Indian Hunting Migrations across the Rocky Mountains: Part 1, Making Meat and Taking Robes

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Going to **B**uffalo

Indian Hunting Migrations across the Rocky Mountains

Part 1, Making Meat and Taking Robes

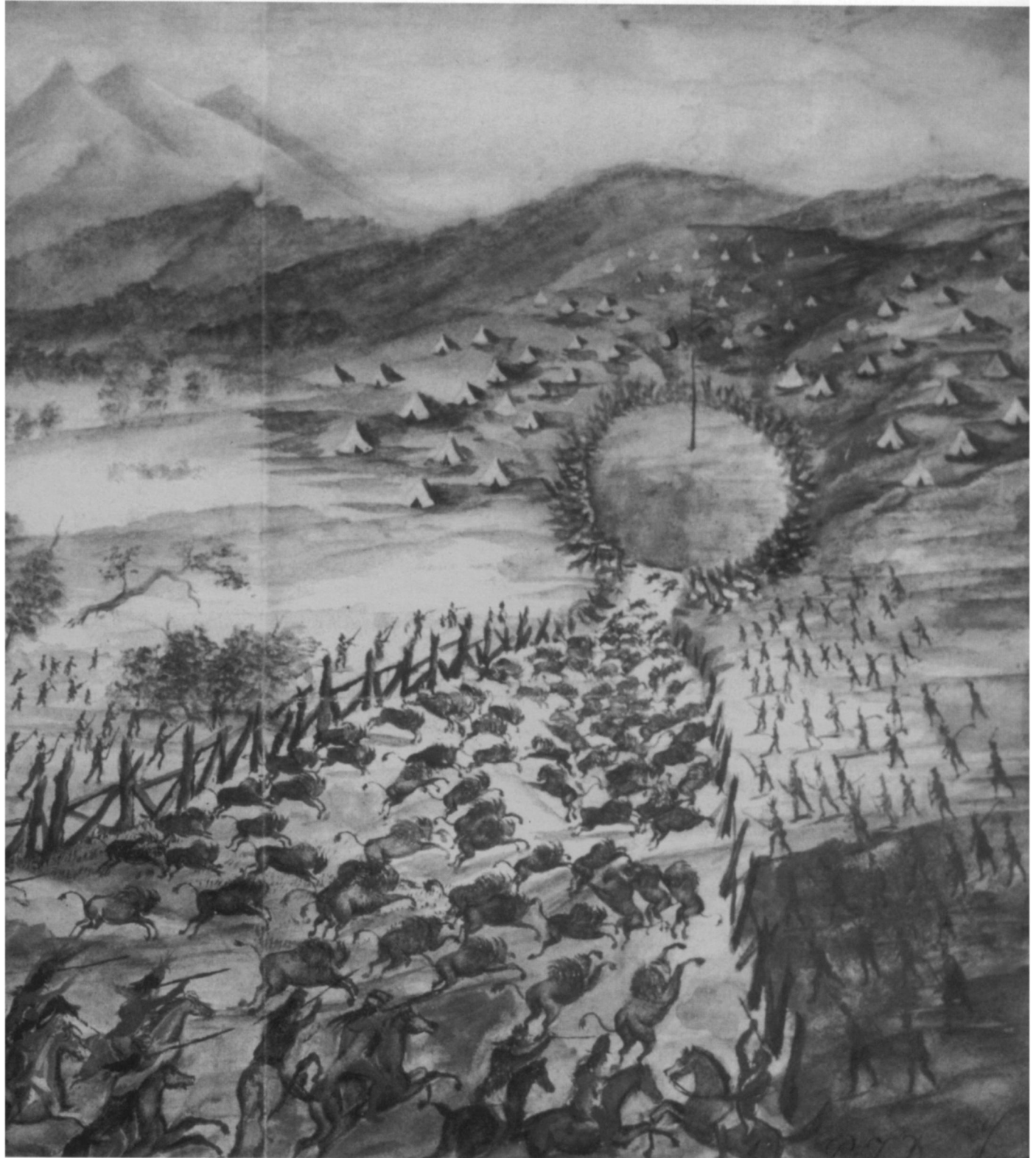
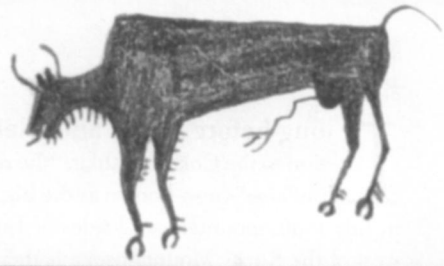
For centuries, Indian people from west of the Rocky Mountains crossed the Continental Divide to hunt buffalo on the short-grass plains near the Missouri, Yellowstone, and Musselshell Rivers of present-day Montana.

This mid-nineteenth-century watercolor, painted by an unknown artist and collected by Jesuit Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, depicts a buffalo surround into which bison are being driven. When trapped in the pound, or corral, at the end, many animals could be killed at one time. The bison design shown at top right is adapted from a Crow shield circa 1850.

Archief Noordbelgische Jezuïetenprovincie, Heverlee, Belgium, photograph courtesy Jackie Peterson



by William E. Farr



Long before Lewis and Clark brought attention to the Cokahlarishkit, “the river of the road to buffalo” (now known as the Big Blackfoot River), in July 1806, mounted cavalcades of Indian people from west of the Rocky Mountains made their way eastward to hunt buffalo for food and hides on the short-grass plains near the Missouri, Yellowstone, and Musselshell Rivers. Traveling over great distances, caravans of men, women, and children, amid crowds of dogs, herds of horses, and the clatter of travois, crossed the high, windswept passes punctuating the Continental Divide. As they went, they frequently rendezvoused with other tribes or picked up additional numbers of equestrian hunters.¹

Coming from the distant reaches of the Columbia Plateau and the tangle of mountain ranges in what would become Idaho and Montana, these western Indians competed for access to the immense herds of migrating buffalo with a welter of plains people, especially those belonging to Blackfoot-speaking tribes and their allies, the Gros Ventres and Sarcees. They also encountered Crows and then, later, the Plains Crees, Gros Ventres, and, of course, the expansive Sioux.² This fierce competition did not deter the bison-hunting Indians from the Pacific Slope. They possessed an absolute passion for what was called, in nineteenth-century hunting parlance, “going to buffalo.” Not to be deterred, they would continue these hunts until the early 1880s, when increased hunting had nearly exterminated the American bison, even in its last sanctuaries on the northern plains.³

It is not easy to generalize about any aspect of this epic history of going to buffalo or about the migrations of the Pend d’Oreilles, Flatheads, Kootenais, Nez Perces, Shoshones, Spokanes, Coeur d’Alenes, and the “infinite of northwestern fragments” who so obsessively hunted the animals. Large numbers participated, but how large and

how frequently they traveled to the plains remain open questions; there was an enormous sweep of mountainous and broken terrain to be negotiated; there were multiple thoroughfares, interconnected trails, pathways, and passages; and, finally, these migrations into buffalo country were intrusions into territories occupied by other tribes. These territories, however, were so familiar to the western peoples through long experience as to establish their own claims to the plains herds. As a consequence, the buffalo country was fought over or reluctantly shared as an established buffalo commons. Set off against a backdrop of telescoping and overwhelming change in the nineteenth century, this contested but common ground would become a focal point for a complicated and on-going “bison diplomacy.”

*At stake was not
only access to
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women.*



THE ENTERPRISE of going to buffalo generated some eighty years of written and oral testimony. Most of this intriguing record, however, is preserved from the perspective of white observers who noted the Indian migrations only casually. The experiences, intentions, and voices of Indian people seldom appear. As with their trails, Indian voices, even when translated and recorded, are too often indirect, misunderstood, incomplete, or muted. Nonetheless, Indian experiences in going to buffalo were recognized by contemporaries as sophisticated and necessary. And while causation or agency may be difficult to assign in specific instances, the general outlines of these undertakings are clear enough. Functioning as extended families, acting in concert as tribal entities with distinct tribal alliances, the western buffalo hunters, whom Gabriel Franchere described in 1814 as “almost always on horseback and . . . as nomadic as Tartars,” went to buffalo because of tangled braids of personal choice or sometimes out of simple necessity.⁴

1. Numerous sources confirm the long-standing tradition of buffalo hunting by western Indians. As early as 1800 David Thompson has the Flatheads hunting buffalo and stealing horses across the Rocky Mountains; Charles LeRays corroborated Flathead buffalo hunting east of the Rocky Mountains in 1801. In his “Yellowstone Journal” fur trader François-Antoine Larocque observed: The Flatheads “come every fall to the fort [forks] of the Missouri and thereabouts to kill Buffaloes of which there are none across that range of Mountains, dress Robes, dry meat with which the[y] return as soon as the Winter sets in.” David Thompson, *Travels in Western North America, 1784–1812*, ed. Victor G. Hopwood (Toronto, 1971), 224; “The Journal of Charles LeRays,” in *South Dakota Historical Collections*, vol. 4 (Pierre, S. Dak., 1908), 175; “Yellowstone Journal,” *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738–1818*, ed. W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen (Norman, 1985), 218–29. See also Barry M. Gough, ed., *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799–1814*, vol. 2 (Toronto, 1992), 523–26; and, of course, Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 13 vols. (Lincoln, 1983–2001), 8:85, especially the entry for Thursday, July 3, 1806, which tells of the Cokahlarishkit.

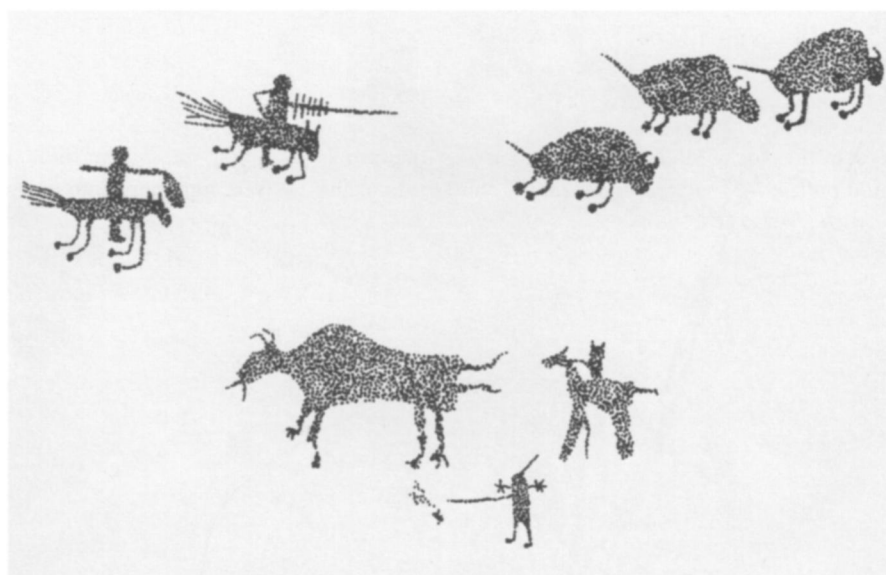
2. Together, three Blackfoot-speaking tribes, namely the Pikanis (Pie-gans) northern and southern, the Kainais (Bloods), and the Siksikas (Blackfoot), made up the Blackfoot Nation, though the relationship was sometimes extended to include the Gros Ventres and the Sarcees as well. The commonalities of the three tribes—who shared a common ancestry, language, heritage, and kinship—are captured by their references to themselves as Nisitapi, meaning “the real people” or “the original people.” As for the English terms Blackfeet and Blackfoot, the first is used in the United States to designate the Southern Pie-gans and sometimes is erroneously extended to include the Blackfoot-speaking tribes of Canada. The second term is used by Canadians to describe the Bloods, Northern Pie-gans, and the Blackfoot. Blackfeet and Blackfoot have often been used interchangeably, especially in historical sources.

3. U.S. Department of War, *Annual Report of the General of the Army 1869, Report Oct. 20, 1869 by Major-General W. S. Hancock, Headquarters Department of Dakota*, 41st Cong., 2d sess., H. Doc. 1, pt. 2, serial 1412, 64. See also Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders’ Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807–1846* (Norman, 1997), 221 and chap. 7.

Columbia Plateau pictographs bear witness to the long tradition of “going to buffalo” among the tribes from the Pacific Slope. The speared man in the center may be a victim of the intertribal warfare associated with bison-hunting forays onto the plains.

The western buffalo hunters and their supporting entourages were subject to an amazing number of variables, some attracting them to buffalo country, some pushing them out of their accustomed routines and home territories. Only portions of the tribal peoples committed themselves to the distant and uncertain enterprise—and for good reason. Tribal populations changed erratically from 1800 to 1885 due to the impact of disease, warfare, fluctuating game populations, and even the discovery of gold. Family, band, and tribal allegiances shifted and were reconfigured at home. On the other side of the Rocky Mountains, a different set of affiliations appeared as escalating numbers of plains peoples fought, negotiated, traded, and, above all, hunted buffalo. Animal and fish populations, too, dwindled or shifted in response to factors inchoate and mutating. Game was capricious and unreliable. Buffalo, in particular, exercised a bewildering ability to disappear, only to appear again in unfathomable numbers, or they drifted seasonally in movements with little discernible pattern. Thus, at the end of their long pilgrimages, western Indians frequently discovered the bison were elsewhere—farther south or east or north—and that the long trail went on.⁵

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the U.S. government had arrived on the northern plains and was periodically intervening in the more-or-less contested hunting grounds with their twisting and temporary diplomacies. These federal interventions took the form of exploratory expeditions, treaty negotiations, and military force. The U.S. government licensed those who traded with the Indians,



From James D. Keyser, *The Five Crowns Ledger: Biographic Warrior Art of the Flathead Indians* (Salt Lake City, 2000), p. 73

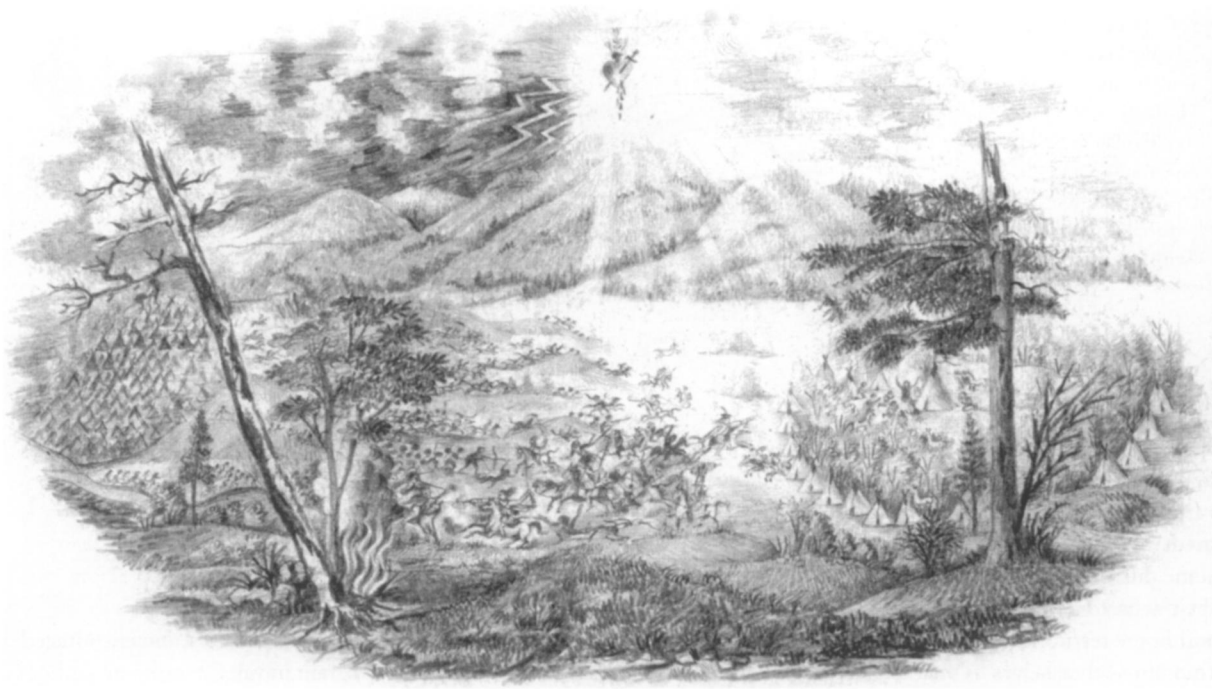
built military forts within tribal territories, and encouraged and guided overland emigrant travel. Government authorities asked for or assigned arbitrary tribal boundaries where there had been none. Officials aspired to create a more visible, coercive, and consolidated indigenous tribal political leadership. These efforts, marked by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, were the first federal attempts to organize and structure what the U.S. government saw as western chaos. These factors, among others, increasingly came to complicate the highly calibrated calculus of decision as western Indians contemplated the attractions of hunting buffalo.

Going to buffalo had always meant more than just another opportunity in the nomadic subsistence cycle. The sheer volume of available protein, the labor-intensive task of “making meat,” as well as the great distances traveled and the acquisition of necessary organizational skills, rendered buffalo hunting significantly different from other pursuits. Bison hunting distinguished itself in two other critical ways—it allowed the hunters to trade buffalo robes for guns, ammunition, and manufactured goods. Most importantly, however, because buffalo hunting was done under essentially martial circumstances, it was tantamount to war. And while intertribal war was not the motivation of the hunters, they did not shy away from it.

Once across the Rocky Mountains, the western bison hunters, who generally enjoyed a surprising degree of intertribal peace at home, especially on the Columbia Plateau, engaged in bitter and bloody fights with plains tribes. At stake was not only access to buffalo and conflicting notions of territory, but also booty in the form of horses, guns, and women. It was a heroic world where warrior deeds lived on in personal names—*Strikes on Both Sides*, *Takes Gun*, *Stabs Down*, *Comes at Night*—a world that imparted status, wealth, and enduring fame. In Salish

4. Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, ed. W. Kaye Lamb (Toronto, 1969), 150.

5. Elliott West, “The Way to the West,” in *Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque, 1995), 72–79; William A. Dobak, “Killing the Canadian Buffalo, 1821–1881,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 27 (Spring 1996), 50–51. Piegan elder Joe Bear Medicine related to me a traditional story, which also appears in George Bird Grinnell’s *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* (New York, 1892), 145–48, in which Napi discovered how the buffalo had mysteriously disappeared from the plains.



Midwest Jesuit Archives, St. Louis, Missouri; photograph courtesy Jackie Peterson

Western tribes entered hostile territory when crossing the mountains to hunt buffalo, but they persisted in exchange for the opportunity to return home with plentiful meat and hides. Jesuit Father Nicholas Point portrayed a Flathead battle with the Blackfeet circa 1841–1846 in this drawing titled *A Battle on the Plains with the Blackfeet* (graphite on paper, 4¼" x 7").

the verb *tcines-geilci*, or “stealing horses,” also meant “going to war.” Just as the Salish speakers used these equivalents as they trooped across the Rocky Mountains to buffalo and battles, so too did Blackfeet war parties equate horses and war as they came west to raid. A Flathead chief, whom noted Canadian explorer David Thompson nicknamed Cartier, accurately described the situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He informed Thompson “[W]hen [we] go to hunt the Bison, we also prepare for war with the Peeagans and their allies.” This situation would not change as the century progressed.⁶

Ross Cox, a clerk for the North West Company before he returned to Ireland in 1818, described this encompassing militancy in graphic terms “The Blackfeet,” he wrote, “lay claim to all that part of the country immediately at the foot of the mountains, which is most frequented by the buffalo, and allege that the Flat-heads, by resorting thither to hunt, are intruders whom they are bound to oppose on all occasions.” On the other hand, the Flatheads, and by this term Cox included a number of Salish speakers and

the Nez Percés, asserted “that their forefathers had always claimed and exercised the right of hunting on these ‘debatable lands,’ and that while but even one of the Flathead warriors remained alive, that right should not be relinquished.” The consequences of these “continued wars” were evidently dreadful. “Total annihilation,” thought Cox, would certainly have taken place shortly for the Salish, “but for our [the North West Company’s] arrival with plentiful supply of ‘villanous saltpeter!’”⁷

Captain Benjamin Bonneville, in the Washington Irving rendition of his journals, also thought that although the Pend d’Oreilles in the 1830s “continually [had] to wage defensive warfare” on the headwaters of the Missouri, Snake, and Salmon Rivers, they could “never be driven to abandon their hunting grounds.” Though not as dramatic as Cox’s account, the Hudson’s Bay Company post journal, kept at Flathead Post along the Clark Fork River in

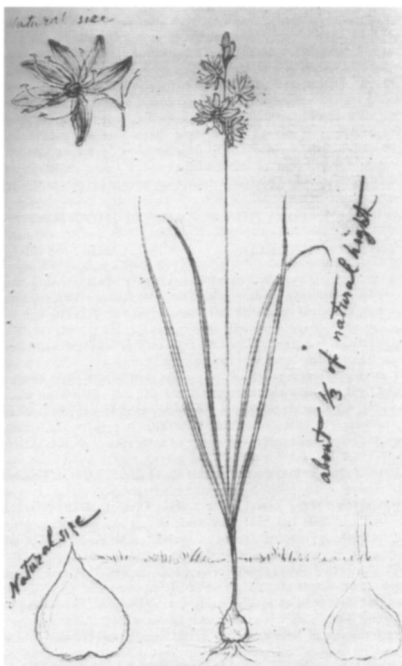
6. Jacqueline Peterson, *Sacred Encounters: Father De Smet and the Indians of the Rocky Mountain West* (Norman, 1993), 49; “Monthly Reports,” August 6, 1880, p. 80, entry 3A, vol. 2, Blackfeet Agency, Record Group 75 (hereafter RG 75), Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, Rocky Mountain Region, Denver, Colorado; J. B. Tyrrell, ed., *David Thompson’s Narrative of his Explorations in Western America, 1784–1812* (Toronto, 1916), 533. See also Thompson, *Travels*, 224; *New York Sun*, January 8, 1899.

7. Ross Cox, *The Columbia River, or Scenes and Adventures*, ed. E. I. Stewart and J. R. Stewart (Norman, 1957), 134–35. See also Lawrence B. Palladino, *Indian and White in the Northwest* (Lancaster, Pa., 1922), 2, concerning the protection of the hunting right as long as one warrior remained alive.

8. Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.*, ed. Edgeley W. Todd, rev. ed. (Norman, 1986), 88; Flathead Post journal, 1824–1825, B 69/e/1, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Saskatchewan.

9. Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River, 1810–1813*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels 1748–1846*, vol. 7 (Cleveland, 1904), 215–16.

1824, explained how the Flatheads, Pend d'Oreilles, Nez Perces, together with some Spokanes, traded there and then together "roved" east of the mountains as they hunted buffalo. The journal's author, Alexander Ross, also related how these Pacific Slope Indians, especially those from within the Rocky Mountains, the more exposed Flatheads and Pend d'Oreilles, outnumbered and outgunned, were often subject to Blackfeet attacks. Given this situation, Ross reported their usual priorities were not only upset but actually reversed, for "war is their trade, hunting their pastime only." Expanding on this unfortunate novelty, Ross pointedly remarked that "to such a height is war carried on between them and their enemies, that their common safety will not admit of their separating." Consequently, "while they generally tent apart" now, even in their own territories, they coalesce as one "against the common enemies of their country, namely the Piegiens and Blackfeet."⁸



From John C. Ewers, *Gustavus Sohon's Portraits of Flathead and Pend d'Oreille Indians, 1854* (Washington, D.C., 1948), opp. p. 14

When Alexander Ross described the Nez Perces, allies of the Salish, he again spoke of this same priority, writing that their occupations were first war and only then buffalo hunting. Ross, a representative of the Hudson's Bay Company, saw these as skewed priorities and complained about Nez Perce self-reliance and their unwillingness to trap beaver for trade with the whites. "I say independent, because their horses procured them guns and ammunition; the buffaloes provided them with food and clothing; and war gave them renown." They needed nothing more and were not about "to submit to the drudgery of killing beavers" and of "crawling about in search of furs."⁹

Going to buffalo, in other words, required western Indians to transform themselves. They were entering a new dispensation, a hostile geographical theater, where horse raiding, ambushes, organized warfare, and the need for military allies colored all decisions, privileged martial talents, and yet offered opportunities for



Stark Museum of Art, Orange, Texas

Many nineteenth-century observers questioned why western tribes did not content themselves with the abundance at home and avoid the clashes that occurred when they hunted buffalo on the plains. Above, Paul Kane's painting, *Kettle Falls, Fort Colville* (no date, oil on paper, 8 1/8" x 13 3/8"), illustrates one of the methods of trapping the salmon and other fish that were food staples of the Columbia River tribes. Camas, one of the primary plant food sources for the western tribes, is shown at top in a drawing by Gustavus Sohon.

wealth unavailable at home. Given these altered conditions and the existence of what was termed “perpetual warfare,” the western Indians were “obliged,” in Father Pierre-Jean De Smet’s words, “to open their way” into the territories claimed by the Crows and the Blackfeet, “arms in hand.” The price of admission to buffalo country was high. Evidently not too high, however, for the western buffalo hunters persisted in coming to the plains season after season to fight, hunt, trade, and socialize.¹⁰

This dogged determination surprised and puzzled many Anglo-European explorers and fur traders in the first half of the nineteenth century. Certainly the western Indians hunted buffalo for food and for the hides they then tanned into sought-after robes; later they traded these products for guns, tobacco, ammunition, and other manufactured commodities. Yet by account after account, such expeditions cost them dearly in casualties and losses of horses and other possessions. To many of the whites reporting these debilitating attacks, buffalo hunting seemed so unnecessary. If only the western Indians would stay in their home places, content with local abundance, be that salmon and other fish, deer and elk, or berries and roots, they would be better off. Yet eager contingents of far-flung tribes up and down the tributaries of the Columbia and Snake Rivers were loath to entertain even the idea of staying home.

The Lemhi Shoshones demonstrated the cross-cultural misunderstanding inherent in this explorer-fur trader perspective regarding the easy availability of food. The Lewis and Clark Expedition found the Shoshones to be “in extreme poverty” in mid-August of 1805. Such a state existed because, although they subsisted on salmon, “this fish either perishes or returns about the 1st of September,” and the Shoshones were thus “compelled at this season in search of subsistence to resort to the Missouri, in the valleys of which there is more game even within the mountains.” Moving slowly “in order to collect and join other bands either of their own nation or the Flatheads, and having become sufficiently strong,” the Shoshones “venture on the Eastern side of the Rocky Mountains into the plains where the buffalo abound.” They moved cautiously and needed such a critical mass because of the presence of their more numerous enemies. Still, we are told, once they have “acquired a good stock of dried meat in the plains,” they always returned as soon as possible “to the mountains while they consume it.”¹¹

10. Pierre-Jean De Smet, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean de Smet* . . . , ed. H. M. Chittenden and A. T. Richardson, 4 vols. (New York, 1905), 3:1187–88; Cox, *Columbia River*, 134–35; Frederick A. Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839* (St. Louis, 1912), 150; Lieutenant R. Saxton report, February 1854, in U.S. Department of War, *Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*, 33d Cong., 2d sess., S. Doc. 78, vol. 13, pt. 1, serial 758, 259.

11. Moulton, ed., *Journals of Lewis and Clark*, 5:119–23.

Hunger and want were not the sole motivations for buffalo hunting. Some tribes viewed the buffalo plains as “their” hunting grounds. After 1811, when the Salish and Kootenais acquired guns from the traders of the North West Company, these Indians resolutely attempted to recover the hunting grounds east of the mountains from which they had been driven by various Blackfoot tribes. With guns, as they related to David Thompson, “we no longer hide ourselves but have regained much of our country, hunt the Bisons for food and clothing, and have good leather tents.”¹² Determined to “go to buffalo,” these Indians expressed a righteous sense of entitlement, arguing that “their fathers had always hunted on the buffalo grounds” and that they would as well.¹³

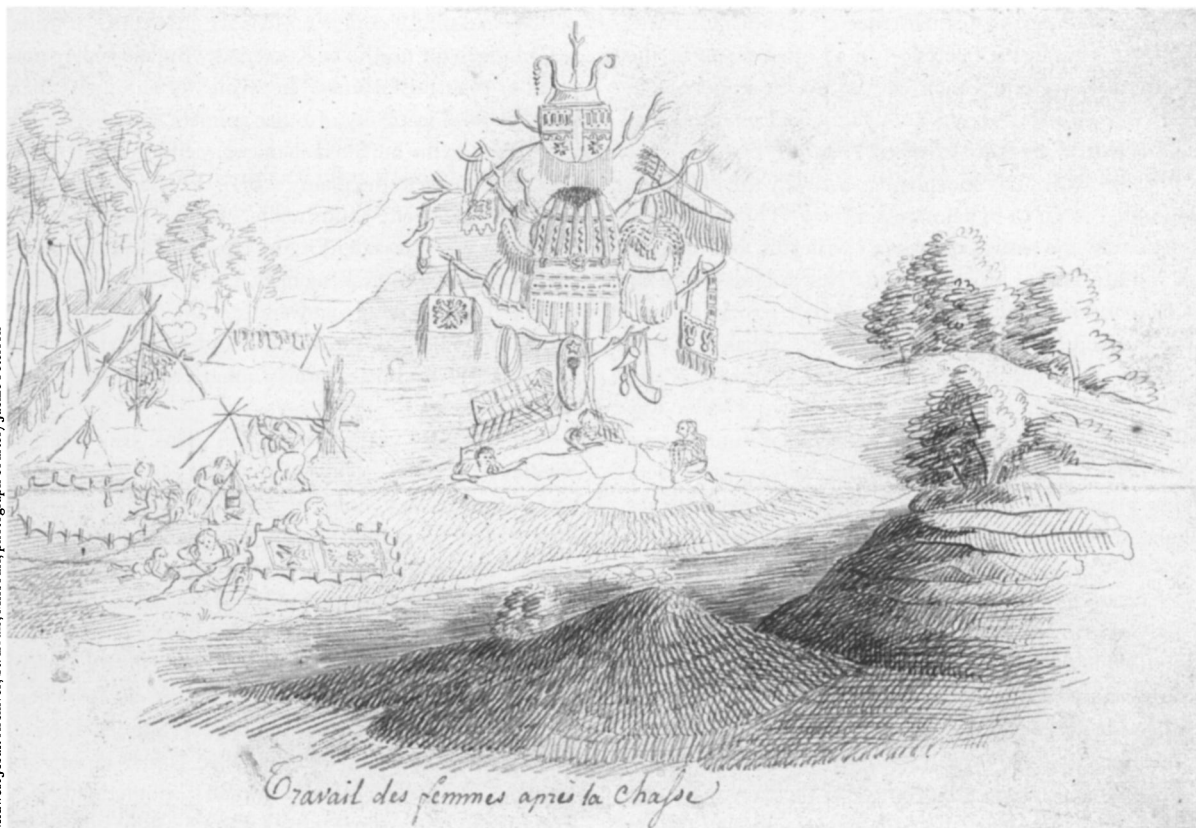
Less understandable was the allure of bison hunting for the Salish and Shahaptin speakers farther away—on the Columbia Plateau and as far west as the eastern edge of the Cascade Mountains among the Yakamas and Sinkaieths or Southern Okanagans. When had they become habituated to the sacred gift of the buffalo? Was it when the bison were at home on the west side of the Continental Divide, on the Snake River plains and the grasslands of the Columbia River Plateau? Had they become so accustomed to buffalo that later, as the marginal western buffalo ranges contracted in the mid-eighteenth century as a result of the introduction of the horse and more efficient hunting, they simply followed the retreat east? Or was this interest in buffalo a relatively new development, sparked by an evolving horse and gun culture in the early nineteenth century? Father De Smet felt the first to be the case. He explained how “now that the buffalo has disappeared from these lands, the poor Indians are obliged to go and pass a portion of the year east of the Rocky Mountains in search of their only means of subsistence.”¹⁴

If speculation abounded in regard to the distant Plateau Indians, the case of the Kootenais, who lived near the forty-

12. Thompson, *Narrative*, 463; Vibert, *Trader Tales*, 254.

13. Cox, *Columbia River*, 134–35.

14. De Smet, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, 3:1187–88; James A. Teit, *The Salishan Tribes of the Western Plateaus*, ed. Franz Boas, Bureau of American Ethnology forty-fifth annual report (Washington, D.C., 1930), 316–22; Anthony McGinnis, *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains, 1738–1889* (Evergreen, Colo., 1990), 9–10, 25. For buffalo ranges on the Plateau, especially in Spokane area, see George Gibbs, *Indian Tribes of Washington Territory*, 33d Cong., 2d sess., 1854, H. Doc. 91, reprinted as *Indian Tribes of Washington Territory* (Fairfield, Wash., 1967), 21; and Francis D. Haines, “The Western Limits of the Buffalo Range,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31 (October 1940), 389–98. William C. Brown reported that there was the persistent opinion among Southern Okanagan elders that there were buffalo in their country and that when Lewis and Clark came through the animals were to be found on the west side of the Rockies, in the region of the upper Snake River. General Joel Palmer, a treaty commissioner at the Walla Walla council, reminded the participants that “It is but a few years since there were a plenty [sic] of Buffalo at Fort Hall. William C. Brown, “Old Fort Okanogan and Okanogan Trail,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 15 (March 1914), 31; Darrell Scott, ed., *Record of the Official Proceedings at the Council in Walla Walla Valley by I. I. Stevens* (Fairfield, Wash., 1985), 52.



Father Point, who accompanied Salish hunting parties in the 1840s, concluded that for the tribe “buffalo is . . . something more than manna in the dessert [sic].” He enumerated the multiple uses of the meat, hides, horns, hair, bones, and other bison parts, documenting many of these in *Women’s Work after the Hunt* (circa 1841–1846, ink on paper, 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ ").

ninth parallel, was clearer. Hudson’s Bay Company trader Peter Fidler, writing as early as 1792, noted that there was not a single buffalo on the west side of the Rocky Mountains because they were “so steep and wide, that it appears like a high perpendicular Wall across all these parts, which infallibly prevents those useful animals to the Indians, which affords them both Food and Clothing, from going there.” But if the buffalo could not get over the mountains to the Kootenais, and never had, then the Kootenais would go to them—despite, as Fidler was quick to point out, the great numbers of “Jumping Deer and the red Deer” and the prevalence of rushing rivers “well stocked with fish of which these several Tribes who inhabit those parts are fond of and eat a great deal of them.”¹⁵

As far as the early fur traders were concerned, this historical speculation as to the origins of bison hunting by the western Indians was of little interest. What interested them was why the outnumbered and outgunned participants persisted so tenaciously in going to buffalo. Why did they not stay on the west side of the mountains where they were

more secure? It was particularly puzzling because, like Peter Fidler, the traders deemed the lands of the Columbia Plateau and the mountain ranges and valleys west of the Continental Divide to be abundant in fish, deer, elk, and any number of roots and berries. Yet, however bountiful, it was not enough.

François-Antoine Larocque, the North West Company fur trader who visited the Yellowstone River country in 1805, also puzzled over this contradiction. When describing the Flatheads, Larocque wrote, they “inhabite the Western side of the Rocky Mountains at the heads of Rivers that have a S. Western Course & flow in the Western Ocean.” He went on to note that the Flatheads, possessing large numbers of horses and lacking buffalo, traveled long distances to the forks of the Missouri River every fall to hunt. If successful, they dried or “made meat” there and dressed robes and then trekked back across the Rocky Mountains as soon as winter arrived. They do this, said Larocque, in spite of having fish as well as “deers of different kinds on their lands and beaver with which they make themselves Robes, but they prefer Buffaloes.” In other words, as far as Larocque was concerned, going to buffalo was a matter of choice. The decision was not made out of necessity as the

15. Peter Fidler, *Journal of a Journey over Land from Buckingham House to the Rocky Mountains in 1792 & 3*, ed. Bruce Haig (Lethbridge, Alberta, 1990), 47.

next seasonal step in a subsistence cycle, but rather was done out of simple preference. In all other respects, the Flatheads represented their country to the traders as in every way superior, “so very good that what fruit trees grows here as shrubs are there tall trees.”¹⁶

In 1814 Ross Cox, speculating as to why the Flatheads continued to go to buffalo, determined “The only cause assigned by the natives of whom I write, for their perpetual warfare, is their love of buffalo.” Nor did this desire for buffalo abate. As late as the 1870s Father Jerome D’Aste, who worked for many years among the Salish at Kettle Falls on the Columbia and among the Flatheads, Pend d’Oreilles, and the Nez Percés in the Bitterroot Valley, was of the opinion that however inimical bison hunting may have been to his mission, he and his fellow Jesuits were powerless. “The passion for buffalo is a regular fever among them,” he said, “and could not be stopped.”¹⁷

Ross Cox too had trouble believing such migrations were necessary. Agreeing with the assessment of his North West Company colleague Alexander Ross, Cox felt the passion for buffalo was one of choice. “The lands of the Flatheads are well stocked with deer, mountain sheep, bears, wild fowl, and fish,” he wrote, “but when we endeavored to induce them to give up such dangerous expeditions, and confine themselves to the produce of their own country, they replied that their fathers had always hunted on the buffalo grounds; that they were accustomed to do the same thing from their infancy; and they would not now abandon a practice which had existed for several generations among their people.”¹⁸

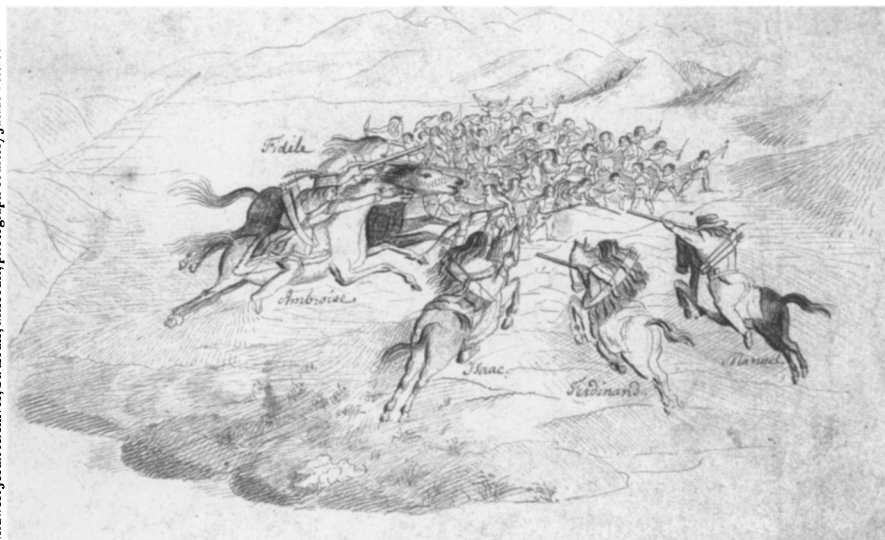
Cox had similar comments to make about the Flatheads’ neighbors to the north, the Kootenais. “Buffalo is the cause of all of their misfortunes,” he wrote, for although “their lands abound in plenty of other animals, their hereditary attachment to the buffalo is so unconquerable, that it drives them every year to the plains, where they come in contact with the Blackfeet.” Unfortunately for the Kootenais and the Flatheads, even after forging close alliances and sticking together for mutual security, the Blackfeet still overwhelmed them, killing many and stealing their horses and goods. In spite of this, the Salish and Kootenais “always return” said Cox, but, as he also noted, ruefully, in “diminished numbers.”¹⁹

Some twenty years later, in the 1840s, Jesuit Father Nicolas Point, who, hoping to continue teaching his spiritual lessons, tagged along with Salish hunting parties on their distant winter and summer buffalo hunts, tried to explain the attraction of buffalo hunting in another way. The Flathead determination to go to buffalo had to do with nutrition. Buffalo flesh, he wrote, can be the staff of life—it can take the place of all other food, especially the flesh of the cow, for, as with bread, “one never tires of it.” Then, after enumerating the multiple uses of the meat, hide, horns, hair, bones, and even bladder, Father Point concluded: “The buffalo is for the Indian . . . something more than manna in the dessert [*sic*]. Hence, all his efforts are bent towards procuring the buffalo. I almost said that all his desires are directed toward the buffalo. For there is no fatigue he will not endure, no enemy he will not defy, no form of death he will not face to get the great beasts.”²⁰



Midwest Jesuit Archives, St. Louis, Missouri, photograph courtesy Jackie Peterson

Father Point recorded three methods of hunting buffalo in *Tactics of the Hunt* (circa 1841–1847, ink on paper, 4³/₄" x 7³/₈")—herding bison over a cliff or “jump,” driving them into a pound, and stalking them on foot or horseback.



Because the Blackfeet claimed the buffalo plains as their own, western tribes often formed military alliances before venturing forth. In *The First to Arrive* (circa 1841–1847, ink on paper, 4 1/4" x 6 1/4"), Father Point depicted five Salish soldiers charging into battle against a much larger Blackfeet force.

The western Indians, however passionate in their pursuit of buffalo, were not as foolhardy as Father Point suggested. Hoping to equalize the Blackfeet advantage in numerical terms and, at least early on, in guns, various tribal entities established elaborate military alliances with each other before venturing forth.²¹ The Kootenais, for example, who “like the Flat-heads, were perpetually engaged in war with the Black-feet for the right of hunting on the buffalo grounds,” had long attached themselves to the Flatheads and Nez Percés in spite of their linguistic differences. And once these alliances were formed, Captain Bonneville, as had Alexander Henry the Younger before him, reported that joining these alliances was preferable to remaining with the old people “alone at home, exposed to the outrages of the Blackfeet” as they raided west across the mountains.²² Moreover, these peoples agreed that none of them would make peace with the Blackfeet until the latter “shall permit them to hunt without molestation on the buffalo plains.”²³ The Flatheads told Cox that with guns and allies from among the Salish speakers and Nez Percés, they hoped to be able to cross the mountains each summer

to hunt the buffalo. In Washington Irving’s *Astoria*, the Shoshones, now that they had “horse to ride and weapon to wear,” were also using this military tactic as they boldly reentered the bison country. Consequently, in the late fall, Irving wrote, “[W]hen salmon disappear from the rivers, and hunger begins to pinch, they venture down into their ancient hunting grounds about the forks of the Missouri to make a foray among the buffaloes.”²⁴ As late as 1841, Father De Smet reported some Shoshones would have little food other than roots “if some hunting parties did not occasionally pass beyond the mountains in pursuit of buffalo, while a part of the tribe proceeds along the banks of the Salmon River, to make provisions for the winter, at the season when the fish come up from the sea.” And more often than not, when the Shoshone bison hunters did so, as Lewis and Clark had reported some thirty-five years earlier, they were in the company of allies, such as the Flatheads.²⁵

Such alliances notwithstanding, the western Indians still moved down from the passes into the upper Missouri region cautiously—it was, after all, contested ground. Irving described their excursions as brief and hurried,

16. Larocque, “Yellowstone Journal,” 218–29.

17. Cox, *Columbia River*, 134; Jerome D’Aste, “Historical Notes on the Flathead Mission,” n.d., folder 1:10, Jerome D’Aste, S.J., Personal Papers Collection, Jesuit Oregon Province Archives, Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington (hereafter Jesuit Oregon Province Archives).

18. Cox, *Columbia River*, 135. Also see Palladino, *Indian and White*, 2.

19. Cox, *Columbia River*, 264.

20. Nicolas Point, *Wilderness Kingdom: Indian Life in the Rocky Mountains: 1840–1847, The Journals and Paintings of Father Nicolas Point*, S. J., trans. Joseph P. Donnelly (New York, 1967), 120; John J. Killoren, “Come, Blackrobe”: *De Smet and the Indian Tragedy* (Norman, 1994), 35.

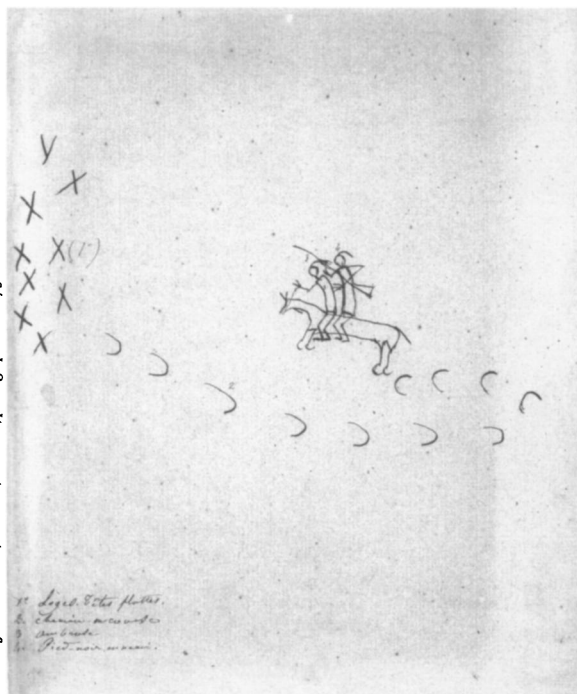
21. The fur traders favored the Flatheads with guns—so much so that by 1824 the early Blackfeet advantage in guns began to shift. At Flathead Post one band in 1824 had “180 guns to 168 ‘men and lads.’” Vibert, *Trader’s Tales*, 215.

22. Cox, *Columbia River*, 263; Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, 144.

23. Cox, *Columbia River*, 264. When describing the Kootenais, Cox wrote: “As with the Flatheads, buffalo is the cause of all their misfortunes; for although . . . their lands abound in plenty of other animals, their hereditary attachment to the buffalo is so unconquerable, that it drives them every year to the plains, where they come into contact with the Blackfeet. . . . They have latterly entered into a kind of alliance, offensive and defensive, with the Flatheads, by which they have agreed that neither party shall make peace with the Black-feet until the latter shall permit them to hunt without molestation on the buffalo plains. As this is a concession not likely to be granted, it is probable that the war will terminate only with the extermination of one or other of the parties.” Ibid.

24. Washington Irving, *Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains*, ed. Edgeley W. Todd (Norman, 1964), 253.

25. Pierre-Jean De Smet, *Letters and Sketches with a Narrative of a Year’s Residence among the Indian Tribes of the Rocky Mountains*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846*, vol. 27 (Cleveland, 1905), 163.



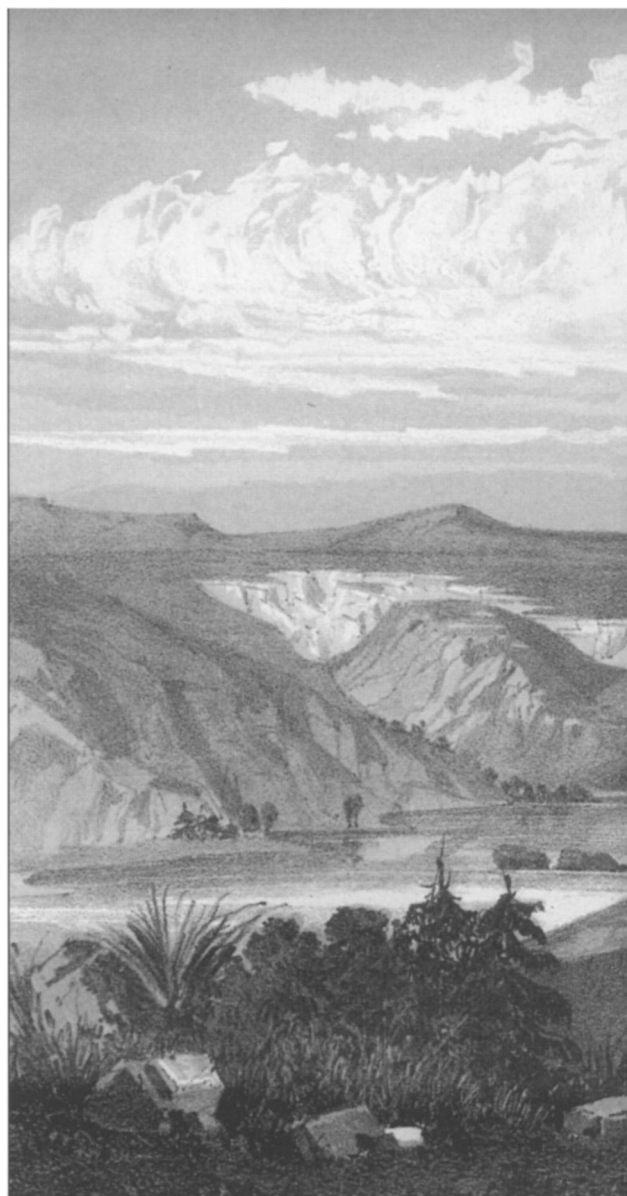
The Salish warrior Ambrose recorded his own story in this drawing (above, circa 1840–1847, ink on paper, 7 1/2" x 9 1/2"). After breaking his bow, Ambrose pretended to be a Blackfeet and tricked one of the enemy into climbing onto his horse, whereupon Ambrose killed the man with his own rifle.

accompanied by “fear and trembling.” Even having exercised considerable wariness, “as soon as they have collected and jerked sufficient buffalo meat for winter provisions, they pack their horses, abandon the dangerous hunting grounds, and hasten back to the mountains, happy if they have not the terrible Blackfeet rattling after them.”²⁶

Commonly the western bison hunters traversed the mountains to hunt buffalo two or three times a year, once “in April, for the bulls, from which they return in June and July,” according to George G. Gibbs in his 1853 report for Isaac I. Stevens, the head of the Northern Pacific Railroad Survey, “and another, after about a month’s recruit, to kill cows, which have by that time become fat.”²⁷ The first Flathead Indian agent installed after the 1855 Hell Gate Treaty, R. H. Lansdale, concurred, adding that while the Salish started in August or September, they did not return until December or even March, spending at least half the year in buffalo country, only to return when the grass had greened up.²⁸ Other observers, including Father Point, described the Flathead winter hunts as beginning in December. Still others had the Pend d’Oreilles and Flatheads departing as soon as “the ground becomes frozen so

26. Ibid.; Irving, *Astoria*, 253.

27. Gibbs, *Indian Tribes*, 21.



they can get no roots, and the fish leave the Jocko and go into deep water for winter.”²⁹

The Southern Okanagans, Spokanes, and Coeur d’Alenes, so reliant upon salmon, left in August, after the “principal root and berry crops, and after the Salmon had been put up.”³⁰ Then too, they had farther to travel and needed to start earlier if they were to coordinate with allies closer to the plains. For those closer, as were the Kootenais, who even went to buffalo on snowshoes in winter, they

28. U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1857, Report No. 154, Sept. 22, 1857 by Flathead Agent R. H. Lansdale*, 35th Cong., 1st sess., S. Doc. 11, serial 919, 663–69. See also Father Michael Accolti to Roothaan, February 28, 1850, in *Recollections of the Flathead Mission*, by Gregory Mengarini, trans. and ed. Gloria Ricci Lothrop (Glendale, Calif., 1977), 208 n. 1.

29. U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1870, Report No. 62, August 10, 1870, by Flathead Agent Geo. E. Ford*, 41st Cong., 3d sess., H. Doc. 1, serial 1449, 660.

30. Walter Cline, “Religion and World View,” in *The Sinkaieth or Southern Okanagon of Washington*, ed. Leslie Spier, General Series in Anthropology No. 6 (Menasha, Wisc., 1938), 155. See also Teit, *Salishan Tribes*, 61.



Explorations and Survey for a Railroad Route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, 1853-5 (Washington, D.C., 1860), vol. 12, book 1, opp. p. 245

The great trails to the buffalo grounds described by Father Point often followed west-flowing rivers to their headwaters on the Continental Divide. One such river, shown above, was the Clark Fork, depicted by a Northern Pacific Railroad Survey illustrator in *View of the Clark's Fork and the Ridge of Mountains, South of the Flathead Lake, Looking East*.

were reported in 1859 by John "Scotty" Linklater, Hudson's Bay Company trader in the Tobacco Valley, to hunt buffalo across the Continental Divide as frequently as every two months.³¹ Clearly there were a great many differences as well as a good deal of improvisation as to when to leave, when to return, and with whom.

The routes and trails to the buffalo plains commonly followed the banks of the west-flowing rivers to their remote headwaters on the Continental Divide. Which of these riverside trails travelers selected depended upon the point of departure, the time of year, water levels, and food available along the way. In the time of David Thompson, the Salish "crossed the Mountains by a wide defile of easy

passage, eastward of the Saleesh or Flathead Lake." This must have been either Marias Pass, referred to by James Doty as early as 1854 as a formerly well-traveled pass, or Cut Bank Pass, which Doty indicated saw considerable use during his time—"probably by the Pend d'Oreilles and Kootenais, who come through to hunt buffalo." The Salish and Kootenais also used a host of passes in what is now Glacier National Park, including Logan Pass, which the Kootenais termed "Packs Pulled Up" because of the need to climb over a final steep rock step. North of the Canadian boundary, Kootenai and Salish people used Kootenai Pass and South Kootenay Pass, accessed by the Grave Creek Trail that was the principal "buffalo trail" from the Tobacco Plains. As for the Coeur d'Alenes, Spokanes, and Southern Okanagans, they "went by a short trail over the Bitterroots, returning in April by Kalispel

31. Augustus J. Thibodo, "Diary of Dr. Augustus J. Thibodo of the Northwest Exploring Expedition, 1859," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31 (July 1940), 330.

River [Clark Fork River] where the snow goes off early in the spring, and grass for horses is abundant." Again, Flathead agent Lansdale remarked how "Indian Tribes from farther west in great numbers crossed the Flathead territory on their way to buffalo." The same Indians who went to buffalo last March, he noted, were "arriving 'from buffalo' and continuing to pour in a great stream through the Hell gate pass westward till about April 10th." They had spent an entire year on the plains. Lansdale also noted that many of the Nez Perces and others were in no particular hurry. They stopped in the Bitterroot and Hell Gate [Clark Fork] Valleys to dig bitterroot before "returning to their own country over the Bitterroot Range." The majority of those not belonging to the Flatheads or Nez Perces had come earlier, crossing "the Flathead River at this agency [near present-day Arlee]" and heading west down the Clark Fork River toward home. Yet, while many bands were returning in April, others, such as the upper Pend d'Oreilles, reported Lansdale, were just starting out on their trek "to pass to bulls" on the east side.³²

Whether they came up the Clark Fork River from Lake Pend d'Oreille or by routes, including the precursor of the Mullan Military Road, that ran east from the Columbia River Plateau across the Bitterroot Mountains, the scattered tribes collected in the corridors of the Bitterroot and Clark Fork Valleys. Again and again, these valleys functioned as great thoroughfares that hunting expeditions used as assembly places, rest stops and supply depots before setting off up the "the river of the road to buffalo," the Big Blackfoot River, to Cadotte's Pass.

Lieutenant Rufus Saxton, leading one of the western arms of the 1853 Stevens railroad survey, arrived at the famous Hell Gate on the Clark Fork River in August. The Hell Gate, Saxton wrote, "is said by the Indians, to be the best and almost only entrance to the pass through the Rocky mountains north of Pierre's Hole." The lengthy Hell Gate Canyon cut by the Clark Fork or Hell Gate River led eventually to the juncture of the Clark Fork and its tributary, the Little Blackfoot River. From there the pack trains of "the Nez Perce, Pend d'Oreilles, Flatheads and other tribes of the mountains . . . with their families and properties "could follow the smaller stream due east and opt for the Hell Gate, Medicine Rock, or French Woman's Passes on the Continental Divide above present-day Helena. Old-timers sometimes called this trail the Vermillion Road because Indians gathered red paint along what was later termed Tenmile Creek. Or, instead of following the Little Blackfoot, the bison hunters could continue up the Clark

Fork River, angling south to enter the expansive plains of the Deer Lodge Valley. Once in the valley, there were more choices to be made. The bison hunters could either exit south over the easy ramps of Deer Lodge Pass into the Big Hole country and out onto the plains via "the Jefferson fork of the Missouri," a route known to Isaac Stevens as the "main Flathead Trail," or they could climb the rocky route to Pipestone Pass, before descending slowly into the grasslands on their way to the Three Forks of the Missouri.³³

It was also common to leave the bowl of the Hell Gate Ronde, the large, circular valley on the west side of the Hell Gate, by traveling directly south up the Bitterroot Valley, following the river until reaching the crosshatched divides separating the Big Hole Valley from the Salmon River, and then, once in the Big Hole, descending the easy grades and drainages east to the Three Forks. There were many variations and shortcuts too. A favorite was to head up the Bitterroot Valley and then cut over the Sapphire Range to the Clark Fork River via Skalkaho Pass. In addition, there were the Northern and Southern Nez Perce Trails and the Great Bannock Trail through the northern part of what would become Yellowstone National Park and any number of trails following the upper reaches of the Snake River plains.

These are "the great hunting trails" that Father Point described in the mid-1840s. They were made and remade, he said, by the almost continuous driving of hundreds, if not thousands of horses over them. Described as "roads" by fur traders, these trails were further rutted by the dragging of lodge poles and numerous travois behind laboring horses. "Each wigwam counted usually seven or eight persons, and these, together with their provisions, required the use of about twenty horses." Even relatively small parties would create as many as "fifteen parallel trails" as they "wound between two chains of mountains which sometimes drew together to offer a view at close range of what was most majestic about the wilderness, sometimes separated to reveal a series of infinitely varied and distant perspectives."³⁴

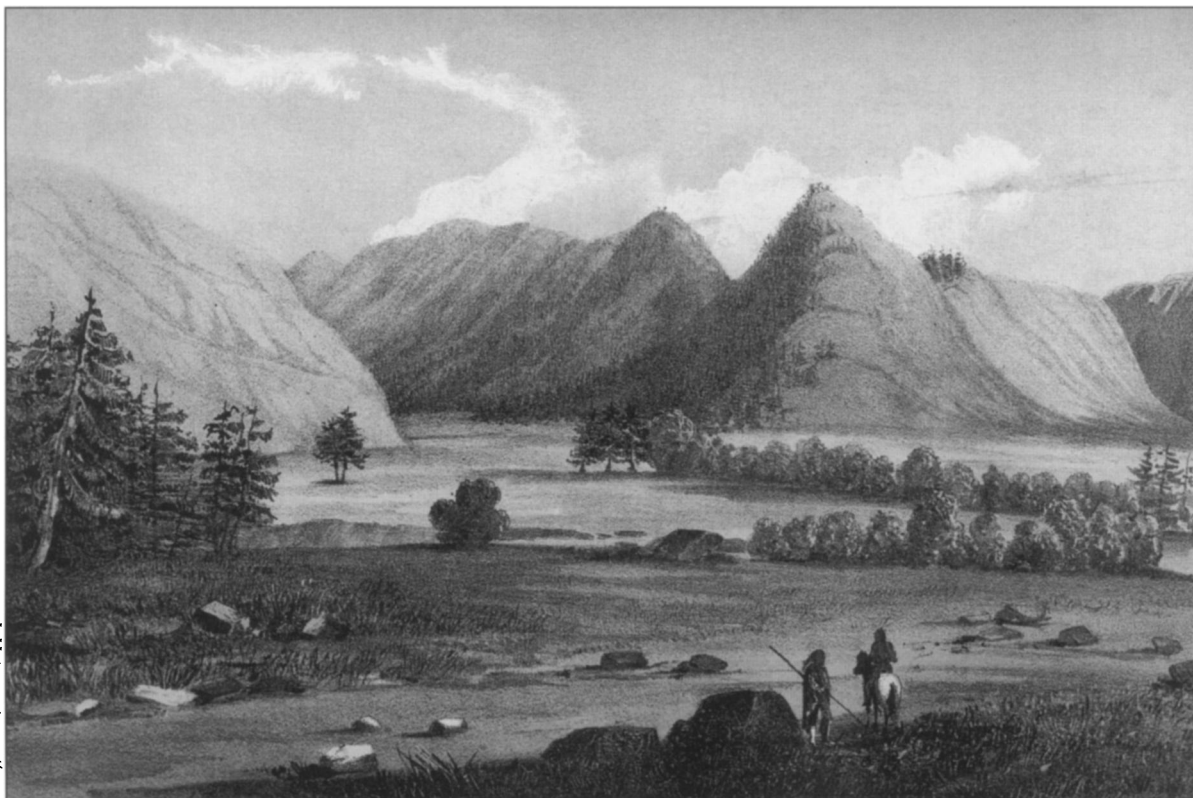
Trapper Warren Ferris described such a parade of a hundred-plus lodges of Pend d'Oreilles traveling up the Clark Fork River: Fancy to yourself, reader," he asked,

three thousand horses of every variety of size and colour, with trappings almost as varied as their appearance, either packed or ridden by a thousand souls from squalling infancy to decrepid [*sic*] age, their persons fantastically ornamented with scarlet coats, blankets of all colors, buffalo robes painted with hideous little

32. Thompson, *Narrative*, 370–71; James Doty report, December 15, 1854, in U.S. Department of War, *Reports of Explorations*, 548; Teit, *Salishan Tribes*, 61; "Report of June 30, 1856 by Flathead Agent Dr. Richard H. Lansdale," roll 22, microcopy M5 (hereafter M5), Washington Superintendency, 1853–1874, RG 75, National Archives, Washington D.C. (hereafter NA).

33. Saxton report, in U.S. Department of War, *Reports of Explorations*, 260; John Owen, *Journals and Letters of Major John Owen*, ed. Seymour Dunbar and Paul C. Phillips, 2 vols. (New York, 1927), 1:30; *Deer Lodge (Mont. Territory) New North-West*, October 14, 1871; *Helena (Mont.) Daily Record*, November 3, 1939; Isaac I. Stevens to A. W. Tinkham, October 3, 1853, in U.S. Department of War, *Reports of Explorations*, 64.

34. Point, *Wilderness Kingdom*, 42–43.



Hunters following the Clark Fork River passed through the narrow Hell Gate Canyon, then had the choice of three major routes to the buffalo plains, including one along the Big Blackfoot River and over Cadotte's Pass. This Northern Pacific Railroad Survey illustration is called *Hell Gate Entrance to Cadotte's Pass from the West*.

figures, resembling grasshoppers . . . and sheepskin dresses garnished with porcupine quills, beads, hawk bells, and human hair. . . . Listen to the rattle of numberless lodgepoles trailed by packhorses, to the various noises of children screaming, women scolding, and dogs howling. Observe occasional frightened horses running away and scattering their loads over the prairie . . . and in every direction crowds of hungry dogs chasing and worrying . . . small animals. Imagine these scenes with all their bustle, vociferation and confusion, lighted by flashes of hundred of gleaming gun-barrells, upon which the rays of a fervent sun are playing . . . and you have a faint idea of the character and aspect of our march.³⁵

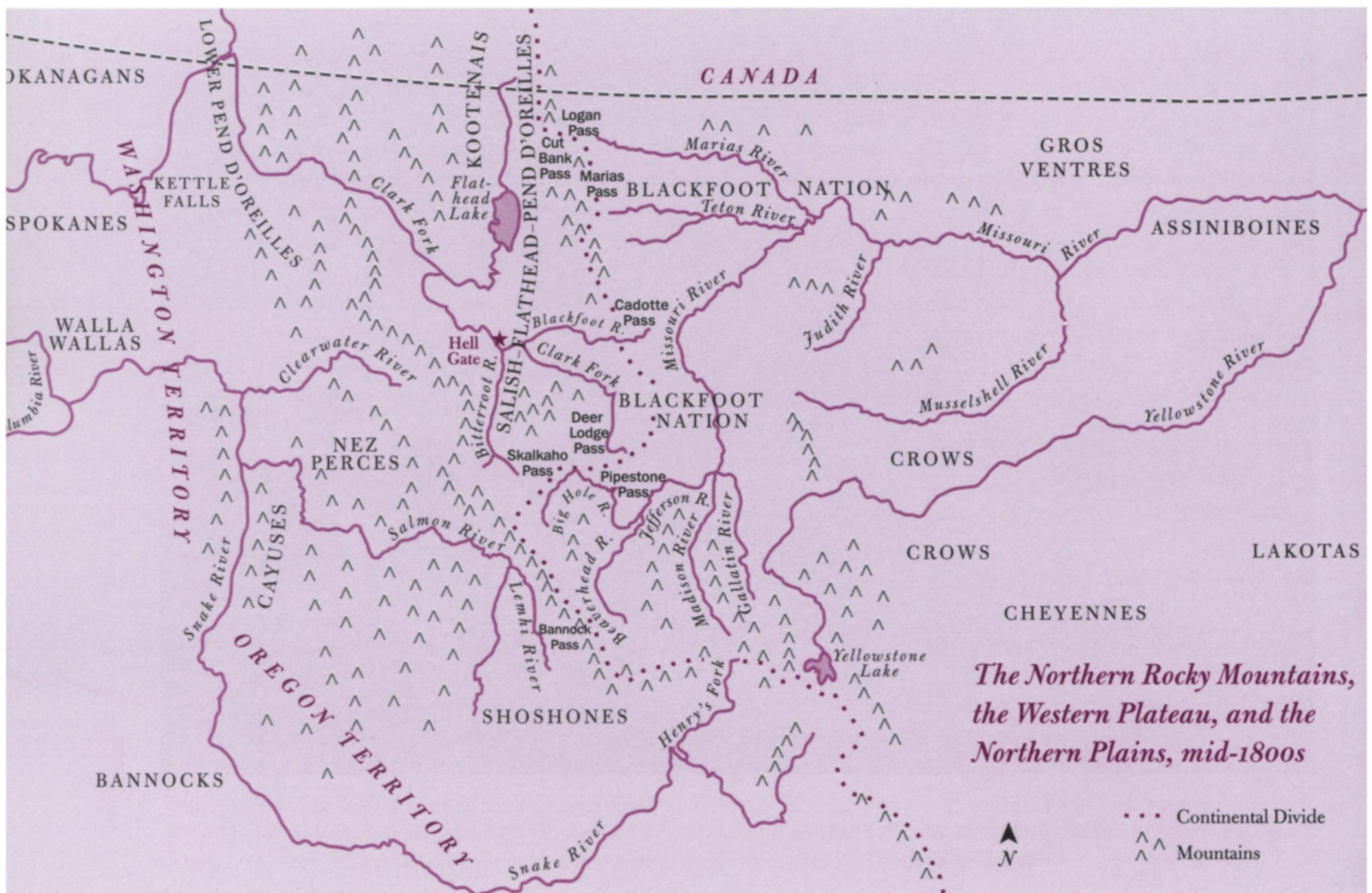
Descriptions of camp life on the plains in the summer of 1853 by Lieutenant John Mullan, a member of the Stevens railroad survey, began with the declaration that "this was a grand season for the Indians." Late in the warm summer evenings, almost arctic in length, there were scenes "of feasting and good cheer." Having killed an abundance of buffalo during the day, "the Indians had no difficulty in

serving up for themselves a rich repast; and around the high blazing fires were to be seen roasting the fat tenderloin ribs, and all the choice pieces of the buffalo, in addition to the many ducks killed during the day." Enjoying such an abundance of wood and more meat than they could eat, "they sat up half the night around the campfires," cooking and telling each other stories of earlier trips and former deeds. No wonder so many of the western Indians opted to go to buffalo. For those that made the long trek east, hunting buffalo was a fascinating and addicting experience.³⁶

Such expeditions continued into the late 1870s. Wesley Merritt, a U.S. cavalry officer, reported after visiting the Missoula Valley that "Indians to the number of from two thousand to three thousand are in the habit of passing through the settlements at least twice a year, on their way to and from the hunting grounds to the southeast." These were the Nez Percés and other tribes from the Lapwai agency in Idaho and the Pend d'Oreilles and Kootenais of the Flathead reservation, although of the "twenty-five hundred or three thousand," the Flatheads were only "about

35. Warren Angus Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains, 1830-1835*, ed. Leroy R. Hafen (Denver, 1983), 182.

36. John Mullan report, January 20, 1854, in U.S. Department of War, *Reports of Explorations*, 306.



five hundred strong.” They always have with them, Colonel Merritt wrote, “from three thousand to four thousand head of horses” and each time they passed through on their way to buffalo, as on their way back, they spent “a month or two” in the Hell Gate Ronde or adjacent valleys.³⁷

Yet not everyone went, or wanted to go. Missionary Marcus Whitman, in 1834, after relating how the Nez Perces and the Flatheads married and mingled, observed that these people are divided into two classes, “one class hunt buffalo in the mountains and on the headwaters of the Columbia and Missouri. This class is constantly exposed to the attacks of the Blackfeet and their numbers are greatly lessened by them.” The other class, he said, “live in their own country and are free from these wars.” They stay at home, devote themselves to raising “many horses and live on deer, elk, and smaller game, together with fish, roots, berries, and moss from pine trees.”³⁸

The Walla Wallas, like the Nez Perces, also divided themselves into two distinct classes, the river fishermen and the buffalo hunters, with the latter parading to the plains, owning numerous horses, and “lording it over their nearby brethren who fished for a living on the Columbia.” Who went and who stayed and for what reasons differed dramatically. Palouse headman T’si-yi-ak, who had married

a Yakama woman and whose son was the great Yakama chief Kamiahkin, said that he did not “go to buffalo” because such excursions “were hazardous and seldom brought the material returns commensurate with the perils involved and the time and effort spent.” Instead, he stayed at home and concentrated on raising horses, through which he grew wealthy. He traded horses “to the returning hunters from the buffalo country for robes and pemmican, for dressed leather for tepees and cured buffalo tongues for the ceremonial feasts.” T’si-yi-ak’s three sons—Show-o-way, Kamiahkin, and Skloom, all reared as Yakamas—were taught to do the same, devoting their attention to raising horses at home rather than making forays to hunt buffalo.³⁹

It is hard to determine what percentage of the population belonged to each of these categories. Captain George B. McClellan later related in his journal that “Every winter half of each tribe—Spokanes, Nez Perces, Kalispels,

37. Wesley Merritt report, February 8, 1876, box 2, Letters Received, February 1870–1880, Part 5, Fort Logan, Montana Territory, Record Group 393, Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821–1920, NA.

38. “Journal and Report by Dr. Marcus Whitman of His Tour of Exploration with Rev. Samuel Parker,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 28 (September 1927), 247.

Yakamas, Saptins, etc. etc., go to the Blackfeet country to hunt the buffalo; returning in the spring with robes, dried meat, etc. etc.” Other numerical estimations of the buffalo hunters included all the able-bodied, the greater part, the majority, one-half, one-third, or just a few. Although they are often characterized as the adventurous, the domineering, and the warlike, the actual motivations of the buffalo hunters were much richer. Some were entrepreneurial, others were outlaws on the run from either Indians or whites, and still others simply had sufficient wealth in the form of guns and horses and could compete in the demanding warrior ethos of the plains.⁴⁰

Evidently buffalo hunting generated a degree of smugness. Those left behind in Nez Perce society, for example, were derided as “provincials” while the families who went to the buffalo plains enjoyed the designation “sophisticated people.” Also called the *Khoo-say-nu* or the *Khoo-say-naya-poo*, meaning the people who move or migrate, these buffalo nomads constituted as many as one-fourth of the Nez Percés. Other estimates, confirmed by Nez Perce chiefs Looking Glass and Three Feathers, had one thousand of the Nez Percés on the Yellowstone River hunting buffalo in December 1855. Among the Cayuses and Walla Wallas, the buffalo hunters, we are told, referred to themselves as “Prairie Indians” and employed a new vocabulary reflective of their distinctive experiences in buffalo country. On the other hand, those who stayed at home were thought of as inferior and became the butt of jokes and derisive descriptions.⁴¹

As the glamorous horse culture of the plains increasingly came to prevail on the Columbia Plateau and even in the mountains of western Montana, and as fur and game

resources dwindled at midcentury as a result of white incursion, Walla Wallas, Spokanes, Cayuses, and others compensated for the reduced hunting by going to buffalo. Natural disasters that befell Indian communities also provided incentives. When high water washed out the fall salmon runs in 1857, the Spokanes tried to avoid starvation by going to buffalo. Earlier, even without fish shortages, Father Joset of the Jesuit mission at Kettle Falls, one of the most important Indian fisheries on the whole of the Columbia River, estimated that the “greater part” of the Schowyelpi, or Kettle Falls Indians, had gone to buffalo. If a drought wiped out the crop, that too would occasion an exodus as Indians sought to solve their problems by heading east across the mountains.⁴²

Local grievances, animosities and family feuds, and struggles over political leadership occasioned much the same reaction. Leaving for an extended hunt that could last a year or two was a good way to ease tensions, assuage hurts, and let things simmer down. Going to buffalo, therefore, was something of a safety valve in tribal society.⁴³ When war broke out in Washington Territory in October 1855, Father De Smet revealed how “almost all” of the Coeur d’Alenes, “in order to shield themselves from the hostilities of the Indians, and to avoid all relations with them,” had gone bison-hunting.⁴⁴ When A. J. Bolon, special Indian agent for the Central District of Washington Territory, was instructed to hold councils with the Yakamas and Nez Percés, he replied that he was unable to do so, for many of the Yakamas had scattered, intentionally he implied, and “gone to the buffalo country to lay up meat for two years supply.” As for the Nez Percés, it was “useless,” he was told, to travel to their country. “I would not find a single chief or man of note. All were gone after buffalo but the old and poor.” Bolon’s informant, the Yakama chief Skloom, said the same was the case with the “Indians of the whole country east of the Columbia.”⁴⁵

39. Thomas R. Garth, “Early Nineteenth Century Tribal Relations in the Columbia Plateau,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 20 (Spring 1964), 53; William Compton Brown, *The Indian Side of the Story* (Spokane, Wash., 1961), 70. See also Thomas J. Farnham, *Travels in the Great Western Prairies, the Anahuc and Rocky Mountains and in the Oregon Territory*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Travels in the Far West, 1839–1846*, vol. 29 (Cleveland, 1906), 97, where Farnham reports that Indians in Oregon who raised cattle and planted crops later “will exchange [these] for buffalo meat with those who hunt.”

40. P. H. Obermeyer, “George B. McClellan and the Pacific Northwest,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* (January 1941), 40; De Smet, *Letters and Sketches*, 163.

41. Deward Walker, Jr., *Conflict and Schism in Nez Perce Acculturation: A Study in Religion and Politics* (Moscow, Idaho, 1985), 14; Allen P. Slickpoo, *Noon Nee-Me-Poo: Culture and History of the Nez Percés* (Lapwai, Idaho, 1973), 142; James Doty, *Journal of Operations of Governor Isaac Ingalls Stevens of Washington Territory in 1855*, ed. Edward J. Kowrach (Fairfield, Wash., 1978), 43. Theodore Stern, *Chiefs and Chief Traders: Indian Relations at Fort Nez Percé, 1818–1855* (Corvallis, Oreg., 1993), 55. Frequently those who did not go to buffalo were too poor. Father Joseph Joset remarked, “Father Hoecken visited Calispels and in spring and summer baptized a number of them chiefly of such as were too poor to follow buffalo hunting.” Likewise Joset noted that Loyola, the Kalispel chief, was most religious and for that reason “gave up forever Buffalo hunting: that was reducing himself to poverty.” Joseph Joset, “Linguistics of the Rocky Mountain Tribes,” Pacific Northwest Tribes Missions Collection, Oregon Jesuit Province Archives.

42. Gibbs, *Indian Tribes*, 19; U.S. Department of Interior, *Annual Report of the Secretary of Interior*, 33d Cong., 2d sess., 1854, S. Doc. 1, pt. 1, serial 746, 447. Referring to the 1857 flood, Governor Benjamin F. Potts reported “Charlo and his people . . . have lost their crops through hailstorms and must go to buffalo to survive.” Later that year, Agent Yantis “reported the Spokanes’ plight as severe. High water had washed out the fall salmon runs; to avoid starvation, many Indians were preparing to ‘go to buffalo.’” B. F. Potts to Carl Schurz, Secretary of the Interior, October 1, 1877, frame 21, roll 517, M234, Montana Superintendency, 1864–1880, RG 75, NA; Ben Yantis to Commissioner J. W. Nesmith, December 7, 1857, roll 20, M5, Washington Superintendency, 1853–1874, RG 75, NA, as quoted in Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun* (Norman, 1970), 106.

43. For buffalo hunting as a safety valve, see Duncan McDonald in *Deer Lodge (Mont. Territory) New North-West*, June 14, 1878. “Were it not for the ‘trip[s] to Buffalo,’ it is probable that the Nez Perce War had been of earlier date and a much bloodier one.”

44. De Smet, *Western Missions and Missionaries*, 309.

45. U.S. Department of the Interior, “Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Report to the Washington Superintendency for 1854 by Special Agent A. J. Bolon,” Sept. 30, 1854, roll 20, M5, Washington Superintendency, 1853–1874, RG 75, NA.

Whatever the reasons—fear, hunger, adventure, escape, trade, or theft—the numbers of western Indians heading east multiplied substantially around midcentury. It is no wonder that by the end of 1853, after meeting with the Blackfeet at Fort Benton on the Missouri, Washington Territory's governor Isaac Stevens could write that as he rode west he was "much astonished at the number of Indians I met who were on their way to the Buffalo hunt, not only the Pend d'Oreille, Colvilles, etc., but indeed all the Indians between the Rocky and Cascade mountains go in surprising numbers to the hunt."⁴⁶

Among these numbers were Salish-speaking Southern Okanagans along with the Priest Rapid or Rock Island peoples who lived along the mid-Columbia River. Their routes depended upon that year's allies but included a northern route from Kettle Falls, where they joined Spokane or Coeur d'Alene bands heading east. At other times, the Southern Okanagans traveled on horseback south, down the west side of the Columbia, to Nez Perce country, and then over the Bitterroot Mountains by one of the southern Nez Perce routes. Suszen Timentwa remembered that her family would go to the Blackfeet country every year after the fall salmon run. The horse-rich families with thirty horses apiece would go to buffalo to hunt for meat and robes or to trade horses for buffalo robes or camas for clothing. Frequently they engaged poor men, often young, to go along to take care of the horses. Women and children accompanied the men on these trips as well, which Timentwa said took some three months each way, and the whole band would stay east of the Rockies with their allies, drying meat, preparing buffalo robes, and trading, usually women with other women, until the middle or end of winter. Another Southern Okanagan woman, Margaret Sersepkin, described how different the buffalo plains were: "The only food was buffalo meat. There was no wood, no rocks, no long grass; the grass was short and thick and the ground so hard that horses left no tracks." People from many different tribes wintered there, she said, including the Yakamas, Spokanes, and Nespelems.⁴⁷

Other Columbia River Plateau people followed these Salish-speaking bands, for buffalo hunting was richly rewarding. In 1846 William Gray described the aftermath of a successful buffalo hunt as the Indians preserved their meat and readied it for transport. Their camps, he wrote, looked "like an extensive meat market; every one has cut their meat in thin slices and spread on sticks and poles to

dry in the sun . . . which is their mode of drying when the weather will permit it." If it did not, the meat was dried over small, smoky fires. When the meat was dried, the women packed it away in buffalo hides that had been prepared by "taking all the flesh and hair off." These were called *parfleches*, and they became the wrappers for the compressed dried meat that was put up in bales weighing from "thirty to forty-five and fifty pounds each" ready for transport on packhorses.⁴⁸

Thomas Farnham, Oregon sojourner by way of the Snake River plains in 1839, was only one of a number of observers who described the rich returns western Indians, either as individual families or as bands, were able to load onto pack strings and lead or drive back from buffalo country. Curiously, in Farnham's case, he encountered a Christian Cayuse family in the Blue Mountains of Oregon. They were on their way home, laden down after a successful journey. "Of the seventeen horses in his caravan, six were loaded with the best flesh of the buffalo cow, cured in the best manner"; two other horses carried his buffalo lodge and an assortment of fine buffalo robes; the hunter, his wife, and two children rode four horses, and the rest were kept to use for relief. Yet, while Farnham gave considerable detail about their camp equipage and packing methods, he limited himself to what he saw and said nothing about how long they had been gone, whether they had joined up with others, or how as a small family they had managed to keep their fine horses and themselves alive in contested buffalo country.⁴⁹

Later and much farther to the north, near the Tobacco Plains hard on the Canadian border, Charles Wilson, while surveying the forty-ninth parallel in 1861, reported that his party met a Kootenai man and his wife returning from "the Buffalo plains" with an immense quantity of jerked meat that somehow they had loaded on their horses. Wilson proclaimed himself astonished at the tremendous weight the horses carried. "I should think," he wrote, "that each horse had between 2000 and 3000 lbs. of meat and skins hanging to his back, on top of which the riders were perched like monkeys." While this had to have been an exaggeration—surely he meant 200 or 300 pounds—the staggering packhorses indicated how bountiful the hunt had been. Father De Smet was just as astounded when he described returning buffalo hunters, Shoshones, near the Bear River. The Indians were driving in front of them a procession of "wretched horses, disproportionate in all their outlines, loaded with bags and boxes to a height equal to their own, and these surmounted by rational beings young and old, male and females, in a variety of figures and

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46. Isaac I. Stevens to Alexander Culbertson, December 25, 1853, frame 74, roll 1, M5, Washington Superintendency, 1853–1874, RG 75, NA.

47. Spier, *Sinkaieth*, 75, 155–56, 76.

48. Donald R. Johnson, ed., *William H. Gray: The Journal of His Journey East, 1836–1837* (Fairfield, Wash., 1980), 48.

49. Farnham, *Travels in the Great Western Prairies*, 329–31.

costumes." On another occasion a Flathead pack train had arrived at St. Mary's Mission in the Bitterroot Valley with some seventy bales of dried buffalo, an estimated three tons, to be given to the Jesuits for their own use during the long winter season.⁵⁰

John Mullan also described an encounter with a portion of a large Nez Perce camp and then, following them, a Flathead camp, as the two dropped into the Bitterroot Valley from the Big Hole on their return from buffalo hunting. Mullan reported that they had several hundred horses with them, many of which were packhorses and "most of them were loaded with heavy bales of dried meat and furs." There were also "innumerable children" in the vanguard. All had been east of the mountains with about eighty lodges, and it had been a "great hunting season." Indians, "both east and west of the continental divide," had killed "hundreds of thousands" of buffalo.⁵¹

Mullan's colleague on the Stevens expedition, Lieutenant Rufus Saxton, witnessed a similar scene much farther west. Just above Lake Pend d'Oreille in August 1854, Saxton's group met a party of at least one hundred Pend d'Oreilles on their way back from a buffalo hunt on the Missouri River. Every one of the men, women, and children was well mounted, with "at least 300 horses . . . loaded with buffalo robes and dried meat" that they hoped to trade with the tribes nearer the coast. No wonder that Saxton found these Pend d'Oreilles "perfectly civil and seemed to feel proud, rich, and independent."⁵² They were.

ALTHOUGH THE DECISION to go to buffalo remained essentially an Indian decision, by the mid-1850s this decision-making was tempered by changes taking place in newly created Washington Territory, whose eastern boundary reached to the Continental Divide. Many of these were directly traceable to Isaac I. Stevens. In 1853 Stevens became governor of Washington Territory—and ex-officio the territory's superintendent of Indian affairs—as well as commander of the Northern Pacific Railroad Survey, which was charged with the task of exploring and surveying a transcontinental route across the northern plains and Washington Territory. Interested in paving the way for white settlement and railroad construction in the territory, Stevens negotiated three treaties that changed the dynamics of going to buffalo: in 1855 at Walla Walla, then at Hell Gate on the Clark Fork River, and finally even outside

Washington Territory, on the other side of the Rockies on the Missouri River. In each of these treaties Governor Stevens, Congress, and the federal Office of Indian Affairs formally recognized—and guaranteed—the right of the Plateau Indians who lived as far west as the Yakamas to continue to go to buffalo as they had always done.

The celebrated treaty tour began on rainy Puget Sound in late 1854. It resumed when Governor Stevens and Joel Palmer, his counterpart in Oregon Territory, fully armed with a federal mandate, congressional funding, and instructions from the Office of Indian Affairs, set out in early summer 1855 to purchase Indian lands from the interior tribes east of the Cascades. Stevens knew from his experiences as head of the railroad survey that once in buffalo country Indians not only hunted for meat and robes, but that, in the words of Father De Smet, war became "not only a business or a pastime, but the occupation *par excellence* of their lives."⁵³ Raiding and killing were not confined to the buffalo grounds or to certain tribes but spilled back over the Continental Divide into the western valleys. Therefore, Stevens, following the lead established in the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, reasoned that an intertribal peace treaty was absolutely necessary if any kind of order were to prevail on the west side of the mountains. Not only did Stevens's Indian policy of small, discrete reservations with continued off-reservation use rights require peace for implementation, so did the success of his transcontinental railroad project and its goal of territorial settlement and economic development.

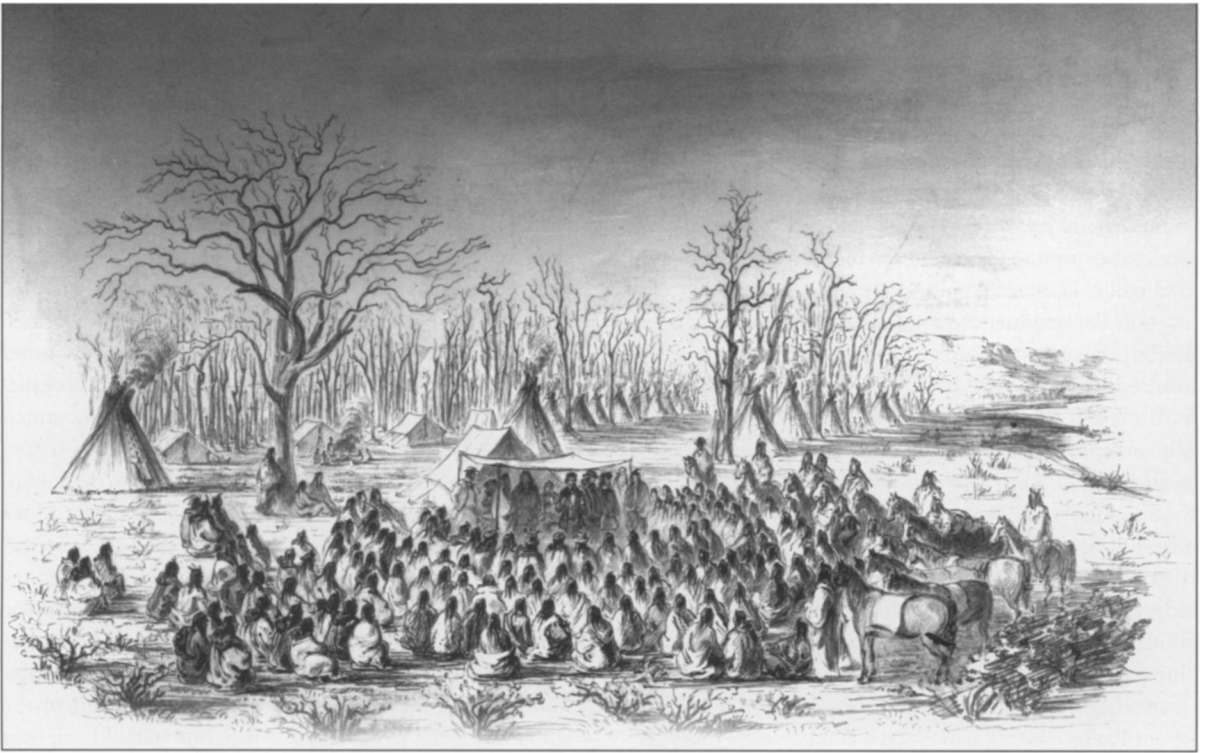
Intertribal peace was more likely to occur if reservation and tribal boundaries between the Cascade and Rocky Mountains were already in place, or at least agreed upon, prior to the construction of a transcontinental railroad. Fully believing that the western Indians in Oregon and Washington were willing to sell their land, Stevens plunged ahead, assembling a major council at Walla Walla for the Nez Percés, Cayuses, Walla Wallas, Yakamas, and others at the end of May 1855. On the council grounds at Walla Walla, Stevens urged the assembled Indians to accept the proposed treaty, arguing that they would receive government protection and funds for their lands. With this government support, they then could build permanent homes, establish farms, purchase agricultural implements, build schools, and have mills, blacksmith shops, and a hospital. To make the land sales more palatable, Stevens and Palmer promised that not only would the Indians receive these federal benefits, but, as in the Puget Sound treaties, the tribes would be able to continue hunting, gathering, and fishing outside of the proposed reservations, in the lands they were being asked to cede or sell. General Palmer, in his own attempt to describe what he thought of as a generous policy, explained the offer this way: "[W]e buy your

50. Charles W. Wilson, *Mapping the Frontier: Charles Wilson's Diary of the Survey of the 49th Parallel, 1858-1862*, ed. George Stanley (Toronto, 1970), 153-54; Mengarini, *Recollections*, 97.

51. Mullan report, in U.S. Department of War, *Reports of Explorations*, 325; and in U.S. Department of Interior, *Annual Report of the Secretary of Interior* (1854), 426.

52. Saxton report, in U.S. Department of War, *Reports of Explorations*, 257.

53. De Smet, *Life, Letters, and Travels*, 3:827.



By the mid-1850s planning for railroad construction and white settlement required treaty agreements with tribes on both sides of the mountains. In negotiating the Lame Bull Treaty, in which the Blackfeet territory became a common hunting ground for all the tribes, Washington Territory governor Isaac I. Stevens brought together members of the Blackfoot Nation, Gros Ventres, Nez Percés, Kootenais, Pend d'Oreilles, Flatheads, and one Cree. Gustavus Sohon recorded the event, which occurred at the confluence of the Judith and Missouri Rivers, in *Blackfoot Council—1855*.

country and pay you for it and give the most of it back to you again.”⁵⁴

As attractive as these proposals were, Stevens held out the additional promise that hunting, fishing, gathering, and more could be done in peace, without the constant fear of raids, war parties, and reprisals. And not only would this new dispensation prevail on the Columbia River Plateau, but on the buffalo plains as well. “We want you to have your roots and to get your berries, and to kill your game. We want you, if you wish, to mount your horses and to go to the Buffalo plains, and we want more; we want you to have peace there,” Stevens said.⁵⁵

Contrary to conventional wisdom, a treaty with the U.S. government would not dismantle traditional subsistence patterns. Quite the opposite. A government treaty would liberate western Indians, allowing them to practice the traditional cycles of gathering, fishing, and hunting at the accustomed times and places without interference. Moreover, an implemented peace would open up additional opportunities that essentially had been closed to a large percentage of the population because of their very tangible military costs and dangers.

With a pronounced oratorical flourish, Governor Stevens trotted out his rhetorical question: Who had been

disturbing them on their way to buffalo; who had intruded into their home territories, stolen their horses, and murdered their men, women, and children? Was it the whites? Of course not. The answer was clear to all—the Blackfeet. “We want that to cease forever,” Stevens said. “If we can agree here, this you will be able to say to the Blackfeet and the Blackfeet will say ‘We will be friends, we will chase the buffalo together on the plain, we will be friends forever.’”⁵⁶

Having a bitterly contested common Indian hunting grounds across the Continental Divide impeded both the grandiose territorial vision of Governor Stevens and the perceived national needs of the United States. Neither, however, was interested at the time in acquiring title or occupying the land of the upper Missouri drainages. Peace in the region was the priority, and the cessation of tribal hostilities on the northern plains became the focus of Stevens’s treaty efforts. The Blackfeet peace with the western Indians, scheduled for the summer of 1854, however, had to be put off. What had been scheduled as the first treaty, the one with the plains tribes, in fact, became the last. Consequently, although now out of order and, as a treaty of cession, of a different character, the Walla Walla Treaty became the first legal step in addressing and altering this situation. On June 9, 1855, it formally recognized the right of the Columbia River tribes to go to buffalo east of the Rockies. Buffalo hunting now, in yet another form of bison

54. Isaac Ingalls Stevens, *A True Copy of the Record of the Official Proceedings at the Council in the Walla Walla Valley, 1855*, ed. Darrell Scott (Fairfield, Wash., 1985), 103.

55. *Ibid.*, 44.

56. *Ibid.*, 46.

diplomacy, became a tribal entitlement, one secured and guaranteed by the U.S. government.

Federal support actually expanded at Stevens's next diplomacy effort, the Hell Gate Treaty with the Pend d'Oreilles, Flatheads, and Kootenais. Conducted July 9, 1855, at the confluence of the Bitterroot and Clark Fork Rivers, the treaty, Stevens told Victor, whom he had selected as head chief, would "keep the Blackfeet out of this valley, and if that will not do it we will then have soldiers who will." Stevens added that he had been directed by the president to make this treaty and that "we hope it will forever settle your troubles with the Blackfeet." Even the decision about which valley was the best choice for the site of a consolidated reservation was affected by the consideration of which was more convenient to go to buffalo.⁵⁷

Later, in mid-October, out on the Missouri beyond Fort Benton, amid the bare cottonwoods clustered at the mouth of the Judith River, Stevens pulled together representatives of the extended Blackfoot Nation, including the Gros Ventres, as well as the Nez Percés, Kootenais, Pend d'Oreilles, and Flatheads—and one Cree chief, Broken Arm. He proposed that "they should all live in peace, stay home when not hunting or trading and that the Blackfeet collectively should agree and consent that what had been defined as Blackfeet territory in the Laramie Treaty of 1851 should become a common hunting ground for 99 years where all the signers, east and west, shall enjoy equal privileges."⁵⁸


Called Lame Bull's Treaty, this agreement formally included the western Indians in a new federally brokered dispensation that divided up the small universe of the short-grass plains. Essentially the federal government said to the western Indians, "You get to go to buffalo as you always have. There is only one caveat: hunting will be restricted to one area, and even that will be shared with others." And to the more numerous Blackfeet, the government said, "When they come, you will leave them alone—in fact you will share with them the buffalo country south of the Missouri River assigned to you at Fort Laramie. Now that land will be designated as a common hunting ground."

The Walla Walla and Hell Gate Treaties held signature provisions for off-reservation access to buffalo. The Lame Bull's Treaty created a precisely delineated common hunting ground for ninety-nine years where "equal and uninterrupted privileges of hunting, fishing and gathering

fruit, grazing animals, curing meat and dressing robes" would be enjoyed. Further instructions included the designation of routes by which western Indians might enter and leave and under what conditions these routes could be traversed.⁵⁹

Although restrictive, these provisions also increased incentives for western Indians to hunt buffalo across the mountains. So too did the rapidly growing white populations, the increasing number of land claims, the destruction of large game on the western side of the Rockies, and greater Indian participation in the robe trade. All magnified the need and the opportunity to go to buffalo. But it was the prospect of peace—bison and peace—that was particularly alluring. There had never been such a thing.

And, at first, peace prevailed, as Margaret Sersepkin attested, for after the treaties when the Washington Territory Indians met with the Blackfeet, they no longer fought as they had. "'We talk different,' the Blackfeet said," remembered Sersepkin, "and we cannot understand one another; but we have the same ways and the same kind of skin; therefore we should not fight among ourselves. So whenever people come over here to hunt buffalo, they can have our hunting grounds. We will be like brothers." It was all very enticing and further encouraged the bison hunters from west of the Rocky Mountains. It also seemed to validate Governor Stevens's self-important boast made to the Spokanes and Coeur d'Alenes in December 1855 that while many of the Plateau tribes had rejected the treaties at Walla Walla and had gone to war with the Americans, he had been "among the Blackfeet in the Plains beyond the mountains, getting the buffalo ranges for you—making Peace that you might hunt the Buffalo."⁶⁰

Guaranteed, if limited, hunting rights and the promised pan-Indian peace, however, proved meaningless in the face of diminishing game, the subsequent hide trade, the discovery of gold, and commercial opportunities that sent whites flooding across the region. Increasingly, settlers demanded territorial status. They wanted as well a federal government that would keep the Indians tractable and confined to reservations away from white settlements. Yet the Stevens treaties gave Indians from west of the Continental Divide a right to "go to buffalo. How was this right to be squared with settlement and territorial aspiration? These demands—along with the rapid decline in the numbers of bison—would eventually force the U.S. Army to intervene, somewhat surprisingly, on behalf of the Indians. Look for Part 2 of "Going to Buffalo" in the Spring 2004 issue. 

57. "Official Proceedings of the Hell Gate Treaty Council with notes by Albert J. Partoll," in *In the Name of the Salish and Kootenai Nation*, ed. Robert Bigart and Clarence Woodcock (Pablo, Mont., 1996), 22, 42.

58. John Fahey, *The Flathead Indians* (Norman, 1974), 101; Kent D. Richards, *Isaac I. Stevens: Young Man in a Hurry* (Pullman, Wash., 1993), 230–34; Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1904), 2:736–40, esp. article 3.

59. William E. Farr, "'When We Were First Paid': The Blackfoot Treaty, the Western Tribes, and the Creation of the Common Hunting Ground, 1855," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 21 (Spring 2001), 131–54.

60. Spier, *Sinkaietk*, 76; Doty, *Journal of Operations*, 43.

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