Upper Swan Valley Historical Society

# NEWS & NOTES

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## Pend d'Oreilles in the Upper Swan Valley

***By Sally Thomason***

The Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribes, who now live on the Flathead Reservation west of the Mission Mountains, once roamed much more extensive territory, eastward far into the plains and northward into what is now Glacier National Park. After the Hellgate treaty of 1855 established the reservation, most of the tribes' aboriginal territories were lost, and the lands available to them for carrying on their traditional life ways shrank dramatically. But for a long time they managed to maintain their age-old custom of crossing the Missions into the Swan and Clearwater valleys to hunt, fish, and gather roots, berries and medicines, as their ancestors had done.

Typically they'd come in late July or August, when the huckleberries and other fruits were ripe. The Salish people, whose reservation dwellings were concentrated around Arlee, usually traveled to the Clearwater valley, while the Pend d'Oreilles, whose homes were farther north, around St. Ignatius and Ronan, visited the Swan Valley. One major route took the Pend d'Oreilles over Piper Crow Pass and down into our valley above Jim Lakes; another came over Mollman Pass and brought them down to the valley north of Elbow Lake, now called Lindbergh Lake. Still another route, the Long Ridge trail, went around the southern end of the Missions and then north into the upper Swan valley.

The travelers came in small groups, often or usually extended family groups. Once they arrived in the valley, they set up camp and hunted, dried meat, prepared hides, gathered edibles and various materials for other purposes, and lived their traditional lives. According to the stories that current elders heard from their parents and grandparents, the people had friendly interactions with early white settlers, who would give them permission to camp on the settlers' land.

The nicknames they gave to friendly suyapis (*suyapi* is their language's word for "white person") were colorful: at the Gordon Ranch, for instance, R.R. Gordon was nicknamed Crooked Nose; and down by Placid Lake the Salish called a white man named Wilbur Vaughn Holes-In-His-Pants because he was poor and had raggedy clothes.

Although relations between the tribes and the settlers were cordial, the Pend d'Oreilles did have one shocking and tragic encounter with a state official. In mid-

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## A 1948 Christmas Story

*As told by **Lena Wolff** to Suzanne Vernon*

***Bud and Lena Wolff** worked as caretakers of the Gordon Ranch from 1947-1951. Their son, Ken, was born in 1947.*

"One day [Christmas] it was about 10 below when we left [the Gordon Ranch]. Got down below the Daisy

**Lena and Bud Wolff**
*Suzanne Vernon photo*

Ranch, which is the Rovero ranch. It was 30 below and the car froze up or quit or something. The gas line froze, so we couldn't get it started. I happened to have a couple old quilts in the back. Kenny was a year old, Dick was about close to three. So we wrapped them up in quilts and carried them for about a mile. I tell you, at 30 below, it wasn't easy.

One of Rovero's friends ... stopped and picked us up and took us to the Daisy Ranch. They were going there. ... we went up to Jack and Mrs. Johnson's; spent Christmas day with them. And that little boy [Kenny] ... cried for hours. I should have dipped him in a tub of warm water.

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October 1908, a party of eight had camped, with the landowner's permission, in a meadow near the Gordon ranch. The men had bought state hunting licenses to ensure that their hunt was legal. A game warden, Charles Peyton, accompanied by a deputized civilian, visited their camp three times, becoming more aggressive with each visit. On his fourth visit, he stormed into the camp and almost at once began firing at the men, who had not drawn their weapons. All three men and a thirteen-year-old boy were killed, but the boy shot and wounded Peyton before dying. When Peyton raised his rifle to shoot the women, one of them shot him dead with her husband's rifle. The women then fled, expecting pursuit by the authorities; but they were never arrested, apparently because it was realized very quickly that Peyton, not the tribal members, had been the aggressor. A historical sign describing this incident, which is known as the Swan Valley Massacre, now stands by the highway near the place where it happened. Although this is by far the most notorious piece of Pend d'Oreille history in the Swan valley, it was also an aberration; the vast majority of their experiences in the valley were part of their normal peaceful existence.

Modern elders remember details of their lives in the hunting camps when they were young. To dry meat brought back by the hunters, they would make a drying rack and gather wood to make the fire under it; to smoke a hide, they would burn rotten wood down to embers and drape the hide over a pole above the embers. They didn't use just any old wood, though: cottonwood's best for drying meat, they say, because it gives lots of red-hot ashes, lots of heat without so many flames, and a good flavor; other kinds of wood make the meat bitter. But if you use cottonwood or willow for smoking your deer or elk hide, the hide will turn an ugly green, so for smoking hides you'll use fir or larch.

Another food source was the inner bark, the cambium, of ponderosa pine trees. The Pend d'Oreilles would cut a strip of bark from the tree and eat the sweet inner bark as a special treat (and it's also nutritious). This practice left one of the few highly visible traces of their visits to the valley: in the grove of ponderosas beside Holland Lake Road near the highway, and in the grove near the Swan Ecosystem Center, you can find trees that have had strips of bark removed.

They also gathered black tree lichen, which they used (among other purposes) as a sweetener in their camas-baking pits. One place in the Swan – I don't know exactly

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# USVHS Recent Happenings

Shirley Trahan, Thompson Smith and Loushie Charlo from the Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee with Swan Valley Elementary School and Salmon Prairie School students at the Swan Valley Museum.

*Lamar photos*

Salish elder Shirley Trahan, a Salish language speaker, leads the students in a traditional stick game.

## Local Students Learn About Tribal Culture

Kindergarten through 8th grade students from Swan Valley Elementary and Salmon Prairie Schools visited the Swan Valley Museum in October to meet with members of Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee and learn about tribal tradition.

Tribal elder and Salish language speaker Shirley Trahan encouraged the students to recite the Salish words for various animal puppets provided by the People's Center. She told the students that passing on traditions to young people is important to tribal elders. She asked the 29 students and 18 adults in attendance if anyone knew the meaning of the word, "culture." Third grader Tate McNutt replied, "A way of life," prompting Trahan to exclaim, "You're right!"

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where it is, but we'll all know once the Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee's place-name map is available – is called There Is Hair because there's lots of very long black lichen hanging down from the trees like a woman's long hair. Another place, somewhere along the river, is called There Are Bull Trout because of the many bull trout along that stretch of water.

They would also gather medicines. A few examples: they used yarrow on wounds, to stop the bleeding and start the healing; they mixed ponderosa pitch and Oregon grape leaves as a poultice for boils; they made tea from Oregon grape roots to bring fevers down, and alumroot tea to relieve diarrhea and stomach cramps; they used a warm juniper bath for pain from arthritis; and they made medicines from kinnikinnick for burns and ailments such as earaches.

Lodgepole sap, boiled till it turned black, was also sometimes used to make a poultice for burns and boils. And, although it's not a medicine, they gathered a kind of very fine moss that grows on rocks that are either damp or under water. They used this moss as a diaper; they say it could be cleaned and re-used multiple times, and it absorbed everything the baby produced without smelling bad.

Some place names offer glimpses of their lives in the valley. The most intriguing of these is *yat'lexw*, which they translate as "jelly ground": as one elder put it, the place is "almost boggy ground, squish squish bounce". Another elder places this area near the river and not far from Lindbergh Lake; maybe it's the bog just off Lindbergh Lake Road, near the first fork. They say they camped in or near this jelly ground.

Another camping area, east of Mollman Pass, was called Wrinkled Ground, and a third was called Big Rocks in the Water because it was by a creek that had large rocks in it. The Swan Mountains also have a name in the Salish-Pend d'Oreille language: they're called *Tl' Ihi*, a phrase meaning "Over There" (not here). There must be many stories about little things that happened during the Pend d'Oreilles' trips to this valley, but I haven't heard many; either the current elders don't remember the old stories or I've just been unlucky.

The elders did talk once about a remarkable packrat nest that was discovered in the valley long ago: the packrat had somehow managed to collect a rifle. How such a small

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animal, even one as determined as a packrat, could have succeeded in dragging a rifle home and then fitting it into his nest was a mystery, they all agreed.

*Sources:* Comments about medicinal plants come from information in Jeff Hart's book *Montana - Native Plants and Early Peoples* (Helena: the Montana Historical Society and the Montana Bicentennial Administration, 1976). The description of the 1908 massacre is based on the Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee's 2008 pamphlet *The Swan Valley Massacre of 1908*, the precursor to the Culture Committee's forthcoming book on the subject. Other information in this article is from my conversations with elders over many years.