

How the Flathead Got Its Name

By Rick Hull

Where does the name "Flathead" come from? The simple answer is it comes from the Chinooks and Coastal Salish, who were coastal tribes who had wedge-shaped flattened heads. Their heads were flattened as infants with a special cradle board. The local Flathead tribe never flattened their heads.

But the question opens up the whole issue – and mystery – of how the practice of Washington tribes put their mark on Montana maps.

Names of people and regions typically come from neighbors. America was named by French cartographers in 1507, who based their decision on the somewhat inflated resume of Italian Amerigo Vespucci.

Germany is a name dating back to Roman times. The residents call themselves the Deutsch, leading to the misnaming of the Pennsylvania "Dutch".

North American tribes generally called themselves "The People". In fact, the opening statement in the American Constitution, "We the People" echoes a Iroquois document that predates the settling of the United States.

However the people reference goes beyond even beyond the nationalist "Volk", or folk, of Germany. Most Indian tribes believed animals, such as bears, were sentient and had their own language, songs and traditions. Some tribes went so far as to describe themselves as the "human beings," and the Nez Perce call themselves the Nimiipuu, or the "Real People."

Tribes were typically named by outsiders, and often those names were converted into their present form by French Canadian fur traders. The Nez Perce had nose piercings and the Pend d'Oreille wore ear ornaments. Gros Ventre means "big belly". Perhaps the most uncomplimentary was the Coeur d'Alene, who were known as sharp traders. It means "heart like an awl." The Blackfeet were said to have gotten their name from setting prairie fires to drive game into traps.

The most notorious were the Lakota-Dakota who we call the Sioux. Some accounts say Sioux means "enemy." Fittingly, the tribe is represented in sign language with a "slice the throat" gesture with the index figure.

This brings the story to the local Flathead Indians. Technically they are the Salish, sometimes narrowed down to the Bitterroot Salish. But Salish unwraps a much bigger package. It refers to a language and family of tribes that cover the Northwest and British Columbia.

The list of Salish tribes literally reads like a road map – Snohomish, Puyallup, Tillamook, Wenatchee, Coeur d'Alene, Chehalis, Colville, Pend d'Oreille, Spokane, and Kalispel (with one "l"). This doesn't include chief names like Seattle, and locally, Charlo and Victor. The entire Puget Sound, San Juan Islands and Vancouver Island area has been renamed the Salish Sea.

The homebase of the Bitterroot Salish was the Bitterroot Valley, south of Missoula. It is located on the very east edge of the Northwest. Since the tribe spent part of the year hunting bison, the Flatheads were likely the only Salish that the Great Plains Indians knew.

"Salish," was translated among other tribes simply as "those who speak Salish." So it is probable that it is the Flatheads are the source of the name "Salish."

But how did the Flatheads get their name? There are a couple theories.

One account points to the number of Salish tribes who strapped their babies into cradle boards, with a hinged board pressing against the forehead.

Along with the Chinooks, the Coast Salish, the Clatsop, Kathlamet, Killamuck, Winnapa, Cowlitz, Kwalhioquas and the Wahkiakum tribes adopted this practice.

The explanation is the Montana Flatheads, had heads that were flat, instead of wedged-shaped.

Jesuit missionary Antoine Ravalli was among those with another theory. He felt that the Flatheads took their Washington relatives, such as the Chinooks, on bison-hunting forays. The unusual head shape attracted notice among the Great Plains tribes.

Evidence for this version is the 1885 book "The Indian Sign Language" by W.P. Clark. The sign for the Flatheads was indicating the wedge-shaped head: "Press the upper part of the forehead and head with palms of hands, fingers extended and touching, tips of finger touching above the head."

The head flattening did not affect the children's intellectual growth.

But there was a negative side. Tribes used the flattening to differentiate themselves from their slaves taken from other tribes, since it could not be duplicated past infancy. The Mayans of Central America, in particular, were known for this.

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