

HOW A MARITAL SPAT SAVED THE BISON

By Rick Hull

According to an oft-repeated story, the chain of events that saved the American bison from extinction began when Walking Coyote killed his wife on the Flathead Reservation and hightailed it east to seek refuge with the Blackfeet. However, it appears Walking Coyote has been slandered.

First, he didn't kill his wife. He did shoot her, but that wasn't the issue and she forgave him. The real crime was bigamy. And few called him Walking Coyote – his name was Samuel Wells and he was generally known as Samuel.

The true story of Samuel comes from a depression-era program, the Montana Writers Project. Sometime before the project ended in 1943, the authors interviewed many of the reservation residents who had memories of that time. They tell of how a half-dozen calves grew to over 700, and how those offspring gave Kalispell's Buffalo Hill its name, and became the core of the National Bison Range.



A descendant of Walking Coyote's herd at the National Bison Range. Photo by Rick Hull

Samuel was a Pend d'Oreille, which is one of the three tribes comprising the Flathead Reservation. The Pend d'Oreille are close relatives of the Flatheads (Salish), and were strong supporters of the Catholic mission at St. Ignatius.

Sometime in the 1870s Samuel stayed behind when his tribe was hunting buffalo in central Montana and lived with the Blackfeet. There he became enamored with Mi-sum-mi-mo-na, a comely Blackfoot, and won permission to marry her with an offer of 16 horses. The problem was he was already married to a Pend d'Oreille, Mary Sabine, who didn't appreciate the new addition. She had been a rich widow when she married Samuel, and had her own views of the situation.

In the spring of 1878 the dispute became so heated that Samuel shot Mary, wounding her in the shoulder. In addition to the strife between wives, Samuel was homesick. But polygamy was against both tribal and Catholic rules, and he would be flogged and fined if he returned.

Mary and others convinced him that a gift might ease his reception back home. So he sent his second wife back to her family, and took off to capture some buffalo. The buffalo were moving north for the summer into Canada, the territory of rival tribes, and this was his last chance. In two trips he caught seven calves, which he had chased down on his horse and lassoed. Hobbles kept the young bison from running away.

Seven buffalo were enough, said his wife, and they headed back, crossing the mountains near present-day Lincoln, and heading down the Blackfoot River. A bull calf died on the way. Some accounts say he saved another when he convinced a mare to suckle it.

It is unknown if Samuel escaped the flogging. But he did settle down with calves near Ronan. By 1884 the herd had grown to a dozen.

Two local ranchers bought ten bison for a reported \$2,500. The first was Charles Allard, who had married into the tribe. Along with buying and shipping thousands of cattle at a time, Allard operated the stage line across the reservation from the railroad at Ravalli to the docks at Polson.

The other was Michael Pablo. Half Mexican and half Blackfoot, he was a successful rancher, and his home boasted a Chinese chef and a European servants.

The partnership became known as the Pablo-Allard herd, and the bison roamed wild on the reservation. Bison can hybridize with cattle, but the pair worked hard to remove any crosses.

Others took credit for bringing bison to the reservation, including Indian Agent Peter Ronan. But most competing herds in the Mission Valley came from Samuel's stock.

Legend says Samuel took the payout and was found dead under a bridge in Missoula after a drunken binge. But others said he was very much alive for several years after the sale.

In 1896 Allard succumbed to an untreated injury at age 44, and the rapidly expanding herd was divided between Pablo and the Allard heirs.

Charles Conrad, the founder of Kalispell, bought about 38 bison in 1902 from the Allard family, and kept them on the site of the present Buffalo Hill Golf Course. He let the herd loose to find its own summer range in Smith Valley, and also bought that property. Thirty-six were sold to the American Bison Society in 1909, and they became the core of the National Bison Range on the Flathead Reservation. Test have shown the Bison Range's buffalo to be especially pure blooded.

Pablo had 700 buffalo after dividing the herd with the Allards. In 1905 it was announced that reservation would be opened to homesteaders, and the common land that supported Pablo's herd would vanish. A deal was struck, in which he sold the herd to the Canadian government.

Delivering on the deal was easier said than done. The roundup started in 1906 and ended in 1909 with the shipping of 709 bison from the Ravalli rail station. The buffalo didn't cooperate when being driven in corrals, and tolerated being penned up in wagons and rail cars even less. There is a photo of a bull bursting through the side of stock car. Among those documenting the roundup was artist Charlie Russell.

Twenty-six miles of fence were built to channel the bison into corrals.

The Pablo-Allard herd was the foundation of buffalo preserves across two nations, almost all the product of a homesick Pend d'Oreille with a double dose of marital strife.

(The basis for this story comes from a previously unpublished manuscript by W. A. Barlett that has been reproduced in "I Will Be Meat for My Salish". The 2001 book, compiled by the Salish Kootenai College, is an invaluable collection of Montana Writers Project interviews.)

Pony Tracks June 2020