

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

How Christmas Came to Lamoose Lake

By Keith Hammer

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At the time of this writing, the Flathead Valley is sitting full of fog while the mountaintops are bathed in sunshine and blue sky. What better time to rise above this "inversion" and let a snowshoe trek to Lamoose Lake shed a little light on whom first brought Christianity to western Montana?

We'll leave the car at Foothill Road and stride out on the gentle grade of Peters Ridge Road for a couple miles. Then, we'll veer off up Olson Creek on an old logging road grown thick with brush. I know it's a little early in our travels together to launch into one of my bushwhacks, but this shortcut is the quickest and steepest route up and out of the fog!

As a kid, I assumed it was Flathead Indians that lived here in the Flathead Valley. I later learned the Indians that indeed flattened their foreheads with boards lived nearer the Pacific Coast, but the name had somehow got stuck on the Salish people of Montana's Bitterroot Valley as well.

Equally puzzling, Mount Aeneas still sounds Greek to me! Well, it turns out the Greek name Aeneas became the popular way to spell out how the Flathead pronounced the French name Ignace, a name taken by several Iroquois Indians that brought Christianity to the Bitterroot decades before the Jesuits did.

Whack! Oh, sorry. Didn't mean for that branch to smack you in the face like that. Just a little further and we'll be out of Olson Creek, the brush, and the fog! I promise!

So, anyway, this Iroquois named Ignace Lamoose came west with a couple dozen other Iroquois and the fur trade around 1812. They settled in with the Flathead in the Bitterroot Valley, where Ignace Lamoose taught them a number of Christian beliefs and customs.

Lamoose and his East Coast Iroquois buddies had been converted to the Roman Catholic faith by the Jesuit "Black Robes" in the St. Lawrence River area before moving west. They felt strongly enough about it to undertake three separate treks back to St. Louis, Missouri to bring a priest to the Bitterroot! The Flathead helped, in part because their elder Shining Shirt had prophesied a time when "men wearing long black dresses . . . will teach us about ?Amotqen, the good spirit who sits on top, and about ?emtep, the evil one who sits at the bottom."

Wow! Sunshine, blue sky, and we've emerged from our bushwhack right at the Peters Ridge Trailhead! So, we cross Peters Ridge Road and off we go up the trail, a piece of cake after Olsen Creek, passing by grand old larch and spruce along Peters

Ridge before the forest becomes distinctly stunted and alpine. We avoid the huge avalanche bowl at the head of Brown's Creek by following Peters Ridge straight up to the Swan Crest. And, from here, we can almost see St. Louis.

In the summer of 1835, Ignace Lamoose, also known as Old Ignace to distinguish himself from a younger Ignace of his group, journeyed with two of his sons over 2,000 miles to St. Louis in search of a Jesuit priest. Assured that the church would send a priest, they returned home the following spring.

When no priest arrived after a year, Old Ignace, three Flathead and a Nez Percé set out again, but were killed by Sioux before reaching St. Louis. Two years later, in the summer of 1839, Young Ignace set out for St. Louis with another Iroquois and shrewdly remained there that winter, personally escorting Father Pierre Jean DeSmet to the Bitterroot the next summer.

Warmed by the sun and full up on views of Great Northern Mountain and the peaks of Glacier National Park we head downhill in search of blazed trees that mark where Alpine Trail #7 is buried in snow. Heading north to Lamoose Lake, we cross several unavoidable avalanche chutes one person at a time and with overbearing politeness. "No, by all means, you first!"

Tucked up against talus slope and cliff, can we help but marvel how Lamoose Lake came to be named after an Iroquois Indian from the East Coast? Comparing our little bushwhack up Olson Creek to a St. Louis bushwhack or two, do you suppose we can survive another trek in the Swan Range to track down who Mount Aeneas was named after and how this whole Bitterroot Jesuit affair ended up in the Flathead Valley?

I hadn't intended this trek to become a Christmas tale, but along the way it occurred to me there may be more than just satire intended by those who joke the Hudson Bay Company acronym HBC stands for Here Before Christ. Indeed the fur trade and the Iroquois brought Christian belief to Montana far in advance of the Jesuit missionaries.

Happy Solstice, Happy Holidays and we'll see you next time!

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column will appear regularly in this paper and will also be archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

(Photo on next page).



Swan View Coalition Photo: Lamoose Lake hugs the Swan Crest during the banner bear grass summer of 2005 .