

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

An Alien Encounter on Mount Aeneas

By Keith Hammer

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Winter Solstice has brought us the shortest day of the year along with the promise long days of summer are on their way. It is a good excuse to resume summer hiking together because it is simpler to describe the way to you in terms of summertime trails. So let us pick up our trek at Lamoose Lake and head out along Alpine Trail #7 for Mt. Aeneas.

Hiking south, we cross avalanche slopes now full of wildflowers and ponder how Flathead Indians like Lamoose and Aeneas came to move north from the Bitterroot Valley. We can see the distant peak of Mt. Aeneas while, nearer at hand, we look down on two peaks, each known as Strawberry Mountain: the west-facing rocky peak identified on USGS maps and its neighboring upside-down strawberry-shaped peak identified by locals. So too, the history of American Indians here is not always straightforward.

In general, it was the Salish speaking people that were first misnamed the Flathead. These included the Salish in the Bitterroot, the Pend d'Oreilles in the upper Flathead River drainage, and the Kalispels in the Camas Prairie and other parts of the Northwest. With time, the term Flathead came to include the Kootenai, which speak a different language altogether and then lived primarily in the Tobacco Valley and Kootenai River country - although these tribes overlapped in both geography and intermarriage.

From Strawberry Lake, Alpine Trail #7 takes us up over a divide and into Jewel Basin Hiking Area, down to Wildcat Lake, back up over a divide near Tongue Mountain, and north to Twin Lakes. The movement of Salish people north from the Bitterroot to the Flathead had its share of ups and downs as well, including their relocation by a government that twice refused the Indians reservation lands of their choosing.

The federal government's means of reducing tensions between the Flathead Indians and "white" settlers in the lower Bitterroot Valley was to relocate the Indians to a reservation in the Jocko River and lower Flathead River area to the north. In 1855 the government negotiated a treaty with Chief Victor of the Salish, Chief Alexander of the Pend d'Oreilles, and Chief Michel of the Kootenai. While Alexander and Michel were willing to remain on lands nearer the new Jesuit Mission at St. Ignatius, Victor insisted the government consider a reservation for his people in the upper Bitterroot.

The government considered and rejected Victor's request. Victor's son Charlot became Chief upon Victor's death and continued to refuse the relocation of his people.

It was not until 1891 that a desperate Charlot and his hungry people were moved north from the Bitterroot to the Jocko and Flathead.

South of Twin Lakes, we follow Alpine Trail #7 from the east side of the Swan Crest to the west side through a notch on the northern shoulder of Mt. Aeneas. Skirting around the higher elevations of Mt. Aeneas, we stumble upon a bulldozer swath running from Flathead Valley bottom straight up to the northern flank of Aeneas. We follow it.

By the time Charlot and his Bitterroot people moved north in 1891, the Flathead Reservation was already being whittled away, first by a 53-mile right of way for the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1882. A Salish Chief Arlee and Kootenai Chief Aeneas Paul asked for one million dollars for their people in exchange for the right of way and asked that the northern border of the reservation be moved from the north-south midpoint of Flathead Lake to the U.S.-Canada border – at a time when only eight “white” families squatted in a group at the head of Flathead Lake. The government instead promised to pay \$16,000 to the tribes and \$7,625 to individual Indians whose farms the railway would cross. Nothing was done to extend the reservation boundary to the north.

We follow the dozer swath straight up the mountainside and arrive out of breath at a cubical cinder block building sitting smack on the north ridge of Mt. Aeneas. It looks like an alien outpost. We find no other sign of the aliens.

We pause to catch our breath, calculating the remaining distance up the ridge to the peak and what the view might be like from way up there. Yep, it looks like we’ll have to finish the climb before this mountain will reveal the relationship between Ignace Lamoose and Chief Aeneas Paul. But it looks like it may be a good place to contemplate the ageless tensions between tribal and private ownership as well.

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: Alpine Trail #7 threads its way between the two Strawberry Peaks and other mountains on its way from Lamoose Lake to Mt. Aeneas on the far horizon.