

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

A View of the Reservation from Mount Aeneas

By Keith Hammer

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We catch our breath in the shade of this alien outpost on the north flank of Mount Aeneas, leaning our backs against the cool cinder blocks of the windowless building. The ripples on Picnic Lakes below us sparkle and dance in the sun while a small stream flows between the two. Perhaps it is these jewel-like views of the area's abundant lakes that first conjured the name Jewel Basin.

Looking north, it is an impressive distance we covered between Lamoose Lake and Mount Aeneas - a distance linked in time when we recall the Iroquois Young Ignace and the older Ignace Lamoose that came west with the fur trade. Young Ignace, also known as Big Knife, had a son who became a Kootenai chief.

Chief Aeneas Paul was born in 1828 and was also known as Big Knife II and Koostatah I. As Chief of a band of Kootenai along the western shore of Flathead Lake, Chief Aeneas would struggle with the rapid white settlement of the Flathead Valley.

As we rise to continue our hike, our gaze turns from the tranquil alpine basin on the east side of the Swan Crest to the bustling checkerboard patterns of the Flathead Valley to the west. The pastoral hue of green hay and golden grain offer a beautiful view while our distance keeps the industrial roar of the highways and construction at bay. Turning our eyes southward and upward, we set a deliberate pace toward the peak of Aeneas.

By one account, the half Iroquois Aeneas Paul rose to chief when Chief Baptiste was killed by Blackfoot Indians near the site of present-day Hungry Horse Dam in 1876. He had six children by his wife Woman's Cry of Triumph. Two of his sons would die at the hands of white men and two would carry on as chief after him. When Chief Aeneas Paul died in 1901, Isaac became chief but died less than a year later.

His brother Koostatah II then became the last formal chief of the Kootenai due to the fact the Salish and Kootenai would later elect to govern themselves through a tribal council. Nonetheless, Baptiste Mathias was named a sub-chief to Koostatah II for the purpose of continuing the traditional Kootenai ceremonies, became a full chief on Koostatah's death in 1942, and reigned until his own death in 1966.

The path up Aeneas is breathtaking not only in the physical exertion it requires, but in the ever-increasing views it affords. Indeed, our climb reveals not only Mount Baptiste and other peaks in the Flathead Range to the east, but peaks in Glacier National Park beyond! As we climb, we see more of the Swan Crest to the south and gain even better views of the Swan Valley, Mission Mountains, and Flathead Lake.

Although the 1855 Hell Gate Treaty reserved lands solely for the Salish and Kootenai tribes, the federal government set out to essentially make farmers out of the native hunters and to diminish their Flathead Reservation lands. The General Allotment Act of 1887 set a national policy of privatizing ownership of tribal lands by generally granting each tribal member 80 to 160 acres of the reservation for their personal use and occupancy. Subsequent Acts tailored to individual reservations implemented the 1887 Act.

In the case of the Flathead Reservation, like many others, there were too few tribal members to whom the entire reservation could be allotted in such small chunks, so the “surplus” was thrown open in 1910 to non-Indian settlement and ownership. This process, which President Teddy Roosevelt called “a mighty pulverizing engine to break up the tribal mass,” brought non-tribal homes, farms, town sites, a national bison range, and Kerr Dam to the Flathead Reservation. The Confederation Salish and Kootenai Tribes have been trying to put their reservation back together ever since.

On the narrow path up Aeneas, we brush up against stunted, twisted alpine fir trees and notice the white hair left clinging to the limbs by mountain goats that have done the same. Mountain goats all but disappeared from this area from a period of over-hunting, but now have rebounded to where sightings of them are common and sometimes in the dozens!

Stepping to the very top of the peak, a broad expanse of public lands stretch to the southern and eastern horizons; National Forest lands that include the Bob Marshall, Great Bear, and Scapegoat Wilderness areas, as well as portions of the Mission Mountain Wilderness. We drop to the ground in awe, give thanks and wonder how President Roosevelt and others had the foresight to reserve for public ownership the Forest Reserves that would become our National Forests.

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 of Chief Aeneas Paul courtesy of the Northwest Montana Historical Society.