



THE CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES
OF THE FLATHEAD NATION

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A People of Vision

A Confederation of the Salish,
Pend d' Oreille
and Kootenai Tribes

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February 4, 2021

The Honorable Josh Slotnik, Chair
The Honorable David Strohmaier
The Honorable Juanita Vero
Missoula Board of County Commissioners
Missoula County Administration Building
200 W. Broadway St.
Missoula, MT 59802

Dear Commissioners Slotnick, Strohmaier, and Vero,

In 2020, the Missoula County Commissioners approached the Tribal Council of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Séliš-Qlispé Culture Committee to discuss the possibility of renaming the Higgins Avenue Bridge, which is now in the process of being reconstructed. Led by Commissioner Dave Strohmaier, the Commissioners expressed interest in a new name for the bridge that would help foster greater awareness and respect in the community for the long and continuing importance of the Missoula area to the CSKT. The Missoula City Council has also expressed their support for this effort. We greatly appreciated and welcomed your consultation with us.

Since that time, the Séliš-Qlispé Elders Advisory Council and Séliš-Qlispé Culture Committee staff have considered the issue, conducted extensive research, and held meetings to discuss potential new names. At the regular annual meeting last August between Tribal Council and the County Commissioner, we shared an initial background paper that offered four or five possible names that emerged from our initial research process. The name that we are recommending, however, did not appear on the earlier list.

On Wednesday, January 27, the Séliš-Qlispé Elders Advisory Council and Culture Committee staff reached a consensus on recommending to Tribal Council the name **Bear Tracks Bridge**. On Tuesday, February 3, Tribal Council considered this name, and voted unanimously to approve it as the name we are proposing to the Missoula County Commission.

Bear Tracks is a name not only steeped in Salish history and culture, but also of direct relevance to the site of the bridge. In October 1891, during the U.S. government's forced removal of some 300 Salish people from the Bitterroot Valley to the Flathead Reservation, the Salish were organized in three groups. One of them was led by sub-chief Louis Vanderburg, a highly respected leader among the Salish people. The party led by Mr. Vanderburg crossed the Clark Fork River on or adjacent to the Higgins Bridge. Louis Vanderburg's father was Sx^wix^wuytis Smxe, meaning Grizzly Bear Tracks. In English, Sx^wix^wuytis Smxe was usually referred to simply as Bear Tracks, and that became the "real" English name of the Vanderburg family. In naming the bridge Bear Tracks, then, we would be honoring the Vanderburg family, and because of their role and connections in our community, we would also be honoring the Salish people as a whole.

(Some historical detail regarding the site of the bridge: in October 1891, a new bridge was still under construction, and would not be completed until 1892 or 1893. The old bridge was rickety and dangerous, so it appears that while some of the Salish party led by Louis Vanderburg may have used the bridge, most forded the river, something that

the Salish people were highly skilled at and accustomed to doing. Regardless, it is clear that many Salish people during the “Trail of Tears” from the Bitterroot to the Jocko passed the very spot where the bridge stands today.)

The great stature of the Bear Tracks name is best understood by touching upon its history. Sx^wix^wuytis Sm^xe, Grizzly Bear Tracks — Louis Vanderburg’s father — was a sub-chief and warrior who signed both the Hellgate Treaty in July 1855 and the Judith River or Lame Bull Treaty in October 1855. Gustavus Sohon, an artist and translator during the treaty negotiations, noted that Sx^wix^wuytis Sm^xe was “a very brave and daring man.” Sohon wrote that “decision is written in every line of his countenance.”

Sx^wix^wuytis Sm^xe was also a medicine man whose powers were of crucial importance to the Salish people in both hunting and in battles with enemy tribes. His powers were so great, and came to be so widely known and respected among all tribes, that if an enemy was considering attacking a Salish camp but discovered that Sx^wix^wuytis Sm^xe was present, they would abandon their plans. Sx^wix^wuytis Sm^xe died in the 1880s, when he was over 90 years old.

According to both tribal elders and numerous written sources, Louis Vanderburg’s personal Salish name was Lk^wut Sm^xe (Far Away Grizzly). He was a trusted sub-chief to Salish head chief Słm^xe Q^woxqeys (Claw of the Little Grizzly — Chief Charlo), throughout the time when the Salish were resisting pressures to force them out of the Bitterroot Valley. Mr. Vanderburg stood by his chief throughout that time, recognizing the importance of the people remaining unified. The historical record reflects his wisdom and strength in opposing those both within and without the tribe who advocated division. Louis Vanderburg died in August 1923 at the age of either 106 or 108.

Members of the Vanderburg / Bear Tracks family have continued to play prominent roles in the Salish community. Louis’s son, Čicnmtú (Passing Someone on the Trail — Victor Vanderburg), was also a prominent leader among the Salish who served on numerous delegations to Washington, D.C. under head chief Martin Charlo. Victor was married to prominent Salish cultural leader Čłx^wm^xłmšná (Sophie Moiese), for whom the Missoula County Commissioners named the public hearing room in the Missoula County Courthouse in 2018. Victor’s son Jerome, and Jerome’s wife Agnes Adams Vanderburg, were among the most highly respected cultural teachers of the community, and Agnes was one of the founding members of Séliš-Qłispé Culture Committee. Their children, Eneas, Joseph, Annie, Vic, and Lucy, have also been prominent members of the Salish community and important cultural teachers. Today, Lucy Vanderburg—who served as Director of the People’s Center, and before that as the Salish Language Specialist for the Séliš-Qłispé Culture Committee— is an active member of the Séliš-Qłispé Elders Advisory Council, as were her brothers Eneas (1926-2019) and Joe (1937-2020).

Just as the Bear Tracks / Vanderburg family has long stood at the center of Salish history and culture, so the site of the bridge, and the surrounding area, also sits at the center of Salish-Kalispel territories. In proposing the name of Bear Tracks Bridge, we offer something to remind all travelers of the rich history of this place, and its continuing important to the people of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. (A more detailed version of this brief history is attached in a PDF prepared by the Séliš-Qłispé Culture Committee.)

We sincerely hope that the Missoula County Commission, and through you the Missoula City Council, will share our enthusiastic support for renaming this historic crossing Bear Tracks Bridge.

Lemłmtš — thank you — to Dave Strohmaier and the Missoula County Commission, and the Missoula City Council, for providing this opportunity to restore to the landscape a recognition of the Salish people and our history. Please do not hesitate to contact us, or the Séliš-Qłispé Culture Committee, if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions. In the meantime, we hope you stay safe and healthy during this time.

Sincerely,
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes



Shelly R. Fyant, Chairwoman
Tribal Council