

The Gift of the Bitterroot

A Salish and Pend d'Oreille Story



Illustrated by Antoine Sandoval
As told by Johnny Arlee

*T*he *G*ift of the *B*itterroot

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Photo of Sophie Moiese, Edward Boos collection #82-021, courtesy of the Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Photos of Serviceberries and Arrowleaf Balsamroot courtesy of Eugene Beckes, starkraven@blackfoot.net

Photo of Johnny Arlee, courtesy of Johnny Arlee

Photo of Antoine Sandoval, courtesy of Antoine Sandoval



*T*his book is dedicated to all the generations
of Salish and Pend d'Oreille women.



Mary Ann Pierre Combs, Johnny Arlee's Tupyé



*T*here was
once a
great famine.





ANTOINETTE BANGS 2017



ANTOINETTE SANDOVAL -07-

*D*uring those sad days, there lived an old woman,
a good woman, who was the wife of a medicine man.
She was worried because her children were slowly
starving.



*T*he family had no meat and no fish. Her sons did their best to survive on old, dried up shoots of balsamroot.





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“My sons have nothing to eat and will soon be dead,” the old woman sobbed. “I will go to the river and mourn and sing my death song.”



So, she went to the river and knelt down. She wept with her face on the ground. Her grey hair covered the earth, and bitter tears flowed as she sang her death song.







The sun came up over the mountain and heard the woman crying. The sun saw the grieving woman and called to her guardian spirit, her helper.

“Your child cries in sorrow for her starving people. Go and comfort her with beauty and food that grows from dead things.” Her guardian spirit took the form of a bird and flew down to her.



*T*he bird spoke to her and said, “Your bitter tears have soaked the earth beneath you. Even now they are mixing with plants that have died. They are making roots of a new plant.”







The bird said, “The plant will have leaves that are close to the ground and silver like your hair. Its blossom will have the rose of my wing feathers.”



“Your children will dig the roots of this new plant. Though it will taste bitter like your tears, they will know it is good food and they will grow to love it,” said the bird.







Last, the bird said, “People will see the flower and say, ‘Here is the silver of our mother’s hair upon the ground and the rose from the wings of the spirit bird. Our mother’s tears of bitterness have given us food.’”



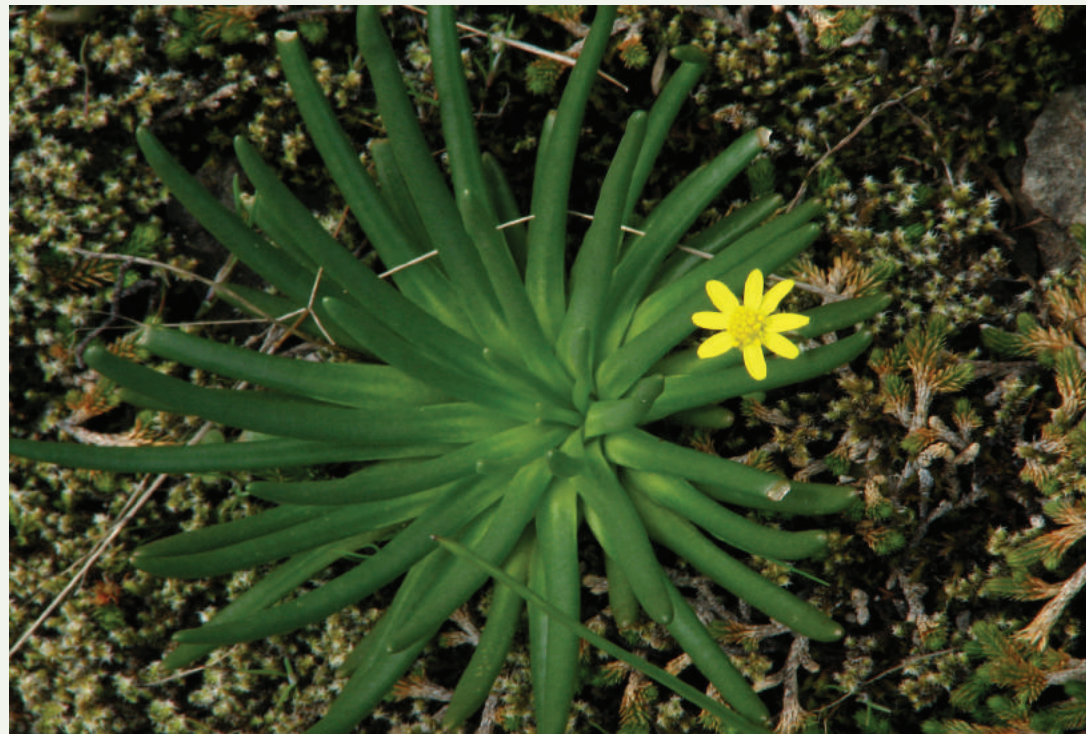
*T*_{he} *B*itterroot and

the *S*alish and *P*end d'Oreille *P*eople





The bitterroot returns to the Salish and Pend d'Oreille people when the spring waters run deep. Women have always been considered the caretakers of the bitterroot. For generations, a woman has been appointed to watch over the plant to determine when it was ready for digging. When the bitterroot was at the right stage, the woman would report to the chief that it was ready for harvesting. The chief would then send runners to inform the community that the next day they would have the bitterroot feast.



Spéłm - Bitterroot plant ready to dig



The people began preparing for this special day by cooking meat and preparing berries and roots that had been harvested the previous year. The bitterroot feast was a day of great importance. The bitterroot was one of the most important food plants of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille.

On the day of the bitterroot feast, the caretaker of the plant would be accompanied by some other women of the tribe, young and old, to help with digging and blessing the bitterroot. Men would accompany the women as guards and protectors.



Sophie Moiese peeling Bitterroot.



The women would select the bitterroot plant to be honored and blessed. The péce?, root digger, would be stuck in the ground near the plant to loosen the soil. As the plant was taken from the ground, the caretaker said prayers of thanks to the Creator. She would welcome the plant and give thanks for its return to the people. Prayers for a good harvest of the other plants and for health throughout the year would be given. The group would then gather enough bitterroot for the feast that awaited their return.

The bitterroot was cleaned and cooked. The common method of cooking bitterroot was steaming the roots for a few minutes on a latticework of small twigs above water, sometimes with service berries or huckleberries. Broth could be made from bitterroots boiled alone or with meat. Bitterroot was sometimes sweetened with camas, but more recently sugar has been used.



Słáq - Serviceberries



When the cooking was completed, all the food was brought out for the feast. After the opening blessing for the meal, speakers were called upon to talk. As each person talked, they spoke to the bitterroot again, welcoming the plant back among the people, asking for blessings for a prosperous year and protection for their families, especially their children.

All the plants gathered each year were considered visitors, and you had to be there at the right time to gather them. The bitterroot can only be harvested for a few weeks in the early stage before it blooms. Once the plant blossoms, the roots begin to get woody and they are hard to peel.



Spéłm - Bitterroot in bloom

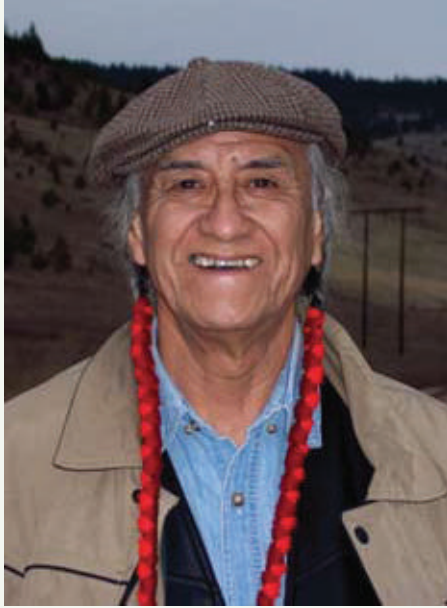


The people did not begin digging their own supply of bitterroot until after the blessing and feast day was completed. The bitterroot has a heart of its own, and when the roots were peeled, the heart of the plant was returned to the soil. Without the proper care and blessing, the plant would go back into the earth and not grow, punishing the people, so that no one would be able to harvest the roots for that year.

The tradition of greeting and blessing the bitterroot's return has been passed down through generations of Salish and Pend d'Oreille families. Today, when spring comes to the Flathead Indian Reservation, the Salish and Pend d'Oreille people will gather at Camas Prairie to welcome the return of their old friend. Generations of Sqelix^w will once again remember and honor the gift of the bitterroot.



Táq^wu - Arrowleaf Balsamroot



Johnny Arlee was raised in the Jocko Valley by his grandparents, Eneas and Isabell Granjo. Johnny grew up with Salish as his first Language and lived the culture in his grandparents' home. After military service and many adventures, Johnny turned his attention to his community. He has devoted much of his adult life to his community as a prayer leader, language instructor and culture bearer. It is his dream that the language be revitalized along with the culture. Johnny holds particular aspirations that young people learn to find their way in the world through the strength and beauty of their culture and language.



Antoine Sandoval was born and raised on the Flathead Indian Reservation. He graduated from Two Eagle River School and Salish Kootenai College. Antoine has been a contract artist producing works from pamphlets to road signs. Much of the work he has done has been for Nk^wusm, the Salish language revitalization school. Antoine has worked collaboratively with his brother Sam and father Tony Sandoval, on a book about the Salish people's first meeting with Lewis and Clark. Antoine's native roots are Salish/Pend d'Oreille and Dine (Navajo). He currently resides in Arlee, Montana.

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