

# Talking Without Words

## Early Inter-Tribal Communications in Montana

Transcript  
Running Time: 22 minutes

### CHAPTER 1 (TRT: 2:55) INTRODUCTION

#### Sally Thompson

In Talking Without Words we will introduce you to different forms of non-verbal communication used by tribes of Montana in the days before telephones and email. We hope that you will be able to follow up with some research of your own about non-verbal communication.

Have you ever wondered how the ancestors of Montana's tribes passed down their history, their stories from one generation to the next? How did people communicate with other tribes in the past when they didn't know each other's languages?

Indian communities had traders and explorers who traveled far and wide. They met people all the time who spoke different languages. Have you ever driven from Missoula to North Dakota? That's how far the Salish people of Western Montana traveled to trade with the Mandans, a farming tribe that lived along the Missouri River in what is now near Bismarck, North Dakota. The Mandans were the center of a huge trading network that encompassed the entire middle of the continent. In 1795, Pierre Antoine Tabeau listed the "Flathead" tribes among those that visited Mandans to barter peltries every year. By this he meant the Salish people, whose name in sign language was misunderstood as Flathead. How did the Salish communicate with other tribes as they traveled along?

In Montana, before English was introduced as the common language, many different languages were spoken by resident tribes. How did people from one tribe communicate with people from other tribes? Many people were multi-lingual. They spoke many languages so that they could be effective communicators with their neighbors and trade associates. Imagine traveling through Europe or Africa. You would go from one country to another where different languages are spoken and different non-verbal cues are given.

If you are involved in international trade, you would have to learn these languages and spend time with the people in order to successfully communicate. It was the same for Indian people throughout North America, before English became the official language and before the written word provided a new means of communication. The local tribes had various means to communicate with each other, directly and indirectly. Some nonverbal communication is unintentional and other signals are given on purpose.



Think about all the ways that you give cues to each other throughout the day. What happens to your face when you don't like what someone is saying to you? What about when you're confused? Surprised? Do you think someone from another country responds in the same way? Did you know that in some cultures it is rude to look at people while they are talking? Indian people had to be very observant of the ways of many other cultures, in order to understand and be understood by people from other tribes.

## **CHAPTER 2 (TRT: 6:34)**

### **SIGN LANGUAGE – DIRECT COMMUNICATION**

#### **Sally Thompson**

Let's think about sign language. For those who didn't speak other languages, the tribes of the Great Plains developed a way to communicate through signs. No one knows how old this language might be. How do we learn about sign language? The most important source is the people themselves. Some people still speak sign language and many of their grandchildren understand it.

#### **ROB COLLIER (Nez Perce)**

I remember my grandfather and when he would talk to us, he would sign. It's that old 'Indian can't hold his hands still.' And so we learned a lot of the different signs for different things like, me, you, the simple signs. And some of the tribal signs, what they called each other and clan signs.

#### **Sally Thompson**

Another source of information comes from research done over a century ago when sign talking was a common practice. We integrate sign language information from a book by W. P. Clark, who spent time with many Indian tribes in the 1870s and 80s, learning all he could about sign language. Another source of information comes from tapes made at the 1930 Sign Language Preservation Conference held in Browning, Montana. This sign talker gathering brought together the best of the sign talkers who still lived in the area in 1930. Indians of the Plains and Mountains were extremely adept at sign language.

#### **ROB COLLIER (Nez Perce)**

Sign language, all up and down the Columbia, the people would come over to this side of the mountains to buffalo hunt and out onto the Plains. And so even though sign language wasn't really part of our particular culture, once we started moving out onto the plains we had to be able to communicate with the people on the Plains. And so that was where sign language came in.

#### **DR. LANNY REAL BIRD (Crow)**

Sign language is a very graceful, beautiful language. It was used like, for example, if we were hunting. We were on an intelligence mission, and we could see we were scouting an area and we could tell somebody (signing). We could tell them that, that we would meet and go check over there.

#### **Sally Thompson**

As Meriwether Lewis noted, after traveling all the way up the Missouri River from St. Louis, sign language, "seems to be universally understood by all the Nations we have yet seen." He goes on to say that "this language is imperfect and liable to error but is much less so than would be expected. The strong parts of the ideas are seldom mistaken." (Lewis, August 14, 1805) (V5-p88)

In an article in the *Dallas Herald*, January 11, 1873, Warren Ferris recalls more details about sign language. He reported:

These signs are made by graceful movements of the fingers, hands and arms, and are natural and expressive. These signs embrace animate and inanimate things; thought hope, light,

darkness, truth, each has its sign, which is well understood as well as all other things, animate or otherwise, that is known to them.

(Ferris 1940:328).

In this film, Mountain Chief of the Blackfeet Tribe is telling a story about a battle on the Whoop-Up Trail along the Milk River.

### **ROB COLLIER (Nez Perce)**

Each clan had their own sign for themselves and then another tribe would have a sign for them as they saw them. So to say that there's one sign for the Sioux people or one sign for the Blackfeet people, they had their own signs for themselves and each band had a sign for them because they saw them differently. They didn't see them as all Blackfeet, all Piegan, all one tribe or another. Each band lived in a different place. A lot of it was what they ate, it was what they ate was the sign that was given to them. Like my people, my grandpa's people, the Nez Perce, they say this is the only sign (sign), but the Shoshone had a different sign for us. They called us the <Native language> eaters. We were the <Native language> eaters.

### **Title Card - WHO SPOKE SIGN LANGUAGE?**

#### **Sally Thompson**

Tihee, the chief of the Bannacks at the Fort Hall Agency in the 1880s, stated that his people learned what they knew of the sign language from the Crows and Nez Perce; that from Fort Hall to the north and east the sign language was well understood, to the west and south it was not. At the 1930 sign language conference, the commemorative event in Browning, those represented at the conference included: Piegan, Blood, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Hidatsa, Arikara, Mandan, Cheyenne, Shoshone, Arapahoe, Crow, and Salish.

#### **DR. LANNY REAL BIRD (Crow)**

Sign language is an international language. It's representative of all the great Indian civilizations and it's still flourishing at this time.

#### **ROB COLLIER (Nez Perce)**

There are still very active sign talkers. Not so much over on the other side, in the Western side, but on the Plains it's still very much utilized. It's the older people and there's a revitalization coming, people are teaching it. Just like the language. Language almost died out and so did the sign language and so there's a big effort moving forward now to make sure that it's not lost.

#### **VERNON FINLEY (Kootenai)**

The sign language has become almost extinct. I mean there are very few people who understand it, and there are some of us that are learning it and reviving it but in the past, even two generations ago when the people spoke, even though they didn't have to, as they were speaking they were signing as well.

## **CHAPTER 3 (TRT: 12:40)**

### **MESSAGES – INDIRECT COMMUNICATION**

#### **Sally Thompson**

People could use sign language when they were together, but how did people leave messages for each other when there was no written language? In addition to hand gestures, local tribes had other ways to communicate using written signs or glyphs. Just as Lewis and Clark left notes for each other along the way, so did Indian people leave messages for each other to convey locational information, warnings,

and noteworthy events. What if you need to leave a message for someone who was coming along later? In such circumstances, sign language wouldn't work. Indian people devised other methods to leave messages.

### **ROB COLLIER (Nez Perce)**

Leaving messages was very important, and it was not just the Nez Perce, the Walla Walla, the Wyam, it was all of the Western tribes that would come to the east to buffalo hunt. And what they did was so ingenious, they built rock cairns. And there's one up here on the pass called Indian Post Office. And you could go there and you could look at the things that had been left, and where they were and where they were distributed and know who had been there ahead of you, where they were going. It was a post office.

### **Sally Thompson**

In the Deer Lodge Valley, Warren Ferris observed an interesting pictographic message or "curious Indian letter" as he called it along the trail back in the 1830s. As you listen, you might sketch a picture of what Ferris describes. He said:

Traversing the Deer House Plains with a party of traders and Flathead Indians, on our way to the Buffalo range, we observed...an Indian letter...This was drawn on a small extent of ground and indicated a fort at the Three Forks of the Missouri. It showed Indians trading at peace with the whites and red sticks indicated Flatheads killed. It was meant as a warning to the Salish not to cross the mountains.

(Warren Ferris 1835)

Prince Maximilian who traveled up the Missouri in the 1830s deciphered another "letter," this one from a Mandan to a fur trader. He said it meant this:

The cross signifies, "I will barter or trade." Three animals are drawn to the right of the cross: one is a buffalo (probably a white buffalo); the two others, a weasel and an otter. The writer offers in exchange for the skins of these animals the articles that he has drawn on the left side of the cross: a beaver and a gun. To the left of the beaver are thirty strokes, each ten separated by a longer line. This means, "I will give 30 beaver skins and a gun for the skins of the three animals on the right side of the cross.

(Prince Maximilian von Wied 1833)

In the dense woods of upper Rock Creek, between the upper Bitterroot and Deer Lodge valleys, old timer Buss Hess, when he was a young boy, found a message carved into the bark of a tree. When he was a child, Andrew Garcia, the author of Tough Trip through Paradise, lived with Buss and his father. Buss asked Andrew Garcia what the image meant. Garcia showed him that the more narrow line meant the trail, and if you were going up the trail you would cross the river, and then you would head up the river until you found three tipis. And that's where they were camped.

From Shoshone country we have an account of a very interesting form of instant message. This was written by a man named Hailey, who was one of the party of miners.

In 1863 a party of prospectors reached Stanley Basin in Custer County. While traveling along the old Indian trail they met a party of about sixty Indians. After a council wherein the whites and Indians exchanged mutual confidences, each proceeded on their respective journey. Three days after this meeting, the prospectors again passed the council grounds and were surprised to see a freshly blazed tree near the trail, on which the adventurers read a story of their meeting with the Indians in a pictograph. It was about five feet long and eighteen inches wide, and on its

surface the artist had done his work so well in red and black pigment that every one of the ten men read it at once. On the upper end of the blaze he had painted the figures of nine men and horses, representing the number the white men had, and their only dog. On the lower end of the pictograph six mounted Indians and one rider-less horse appeared; not far from these the artist had painted a rifle and the accoutrements of which the Indian had divested himself. In the middle of the picture the two ambassadors were represented with clasped hands. Between them and the figure representing the white company, the artist had painted a miner's pick, near which was an arrow pointing in the direction the white men had gone. There was no mistaking the object of the pictograph; it was to advise their people passing that way that there might be or had been a party of gold hunters in the country.

(Hailey: 1910).

Another Indian message was recorded by Thomas LaForge in the 1870s. You might draw what's in your minds eye, what's in your own imagination as you listen to what he recorded. He said:

I found an Indian "sign" one time on my way back from Bozeman, where I had been sent to get our mail. Half-way down Fleischman Creek my attention was attracted by a whole blanket spread out on the grass beside the trail. It was a good red blanket, with a black stripe across each end. On its middle was lying a bunch of wild rye, this neatly tied together by twisted long blades of green grass. One corner of the blanket was folded over and weighted thus. My interpretation was that the bundle of wild rye meant, "We are all together, " and the folded corner of the blanket indicated the direction of travel. I decided these were Sioux, and that other Sioux, for whom the sign was meant, were not far behind. So I got away from that vicinity as rapidly as circumstances would permit....

(LaForge 1870s) [Source: Marquis 1928 pp74-5).

Ackomakki's maps show the territory known by the Blackfoot and the features on the landscape that they used as landmarks as they traveled around. Ackomakki used glyphs, written symbols to convey the names of the landmarks in the Upper Missouri country. You might recognize some of these places. There's King or Chief mountain, there's Heart for Heart Butte. There's the Bear's Tooth, a huge rock along the Missouri River near Gates of the Mountains, and there's the Bear's Paw Mountains.

Indian travelers knew how to map the territory. They used whatever materials they had handy to prepare maps. Some of them were made of sand and rocks and sticks and whatever was at hand just to draw a picture. Others were carefully drawn on stone, or hide or bark to provide guidance to others. The tribes of the intermountain area used smoke in a number of ways. They "set the prairie on fire" as warnings to others such as the fires that Lewis & Clark followed much of the way up the upper Missouri.

### **ROB COLLIER (Nez Perce)**

Our people didn't use the smoke signal obviously because of where we lived. We lived in valleys and you couldn't see smoke unless it was a fire. But out on the Plains I know they used them because you could see it for miles and miles and miles.

### **Sally Thompson**

Cameahwait's band of Shoshones set the prairies afire to call people together for the buffalo hunt. During the same year that Lewis & Clark met the Shoshone, the summer of 1805, the Mountain Crow told Antoine Larocque how to notify them of his arrival when he returned the next year, documenting their system of smoke signal communication. Allies should use 4 fires, one less or one more would indicate enemies. He recorded it as this:

Upon my arrival at the Island if I do not find them I am to go to Pryor Mountains & then light 4 different fire[s] on 4 successive days, and they will come to us (for it is very high and the fire can be seen at a great distance) in number 4 & not more, if more than 4 come to us we are to act upon the defensive for it will be other Indians if we light less than 3 fires they will not come to us but think it is enemies.

(cited in Wood & Thiessen p192)

What if you want to leave a record for the future, to supplement and enhance the oral history? Indian people had various ways to do this. One way was the Winter Count. Lone Dog, a Nakota, kept his winter count from 1800 to 1871. His winter count burned up in a fire, but copies were made before this happened. The South Dakota Historical Society has a copy of Lone Dog's winter count. It was drawn on cowhide. Each picture records an event. It tells about many things. It shows a meteor shower and an outbreak of measles. It records a flood on the Missouri River. The keeper of the winter count had to remember what each picture meant. It was his job to tell the stories to others.

### **ANDY BLACKWATER (Kainai)**

These are the areas, high level areas. This is where the spirits touch base with the ground. So in those areas, we have common knowledge of all of them. And this is one place that people seek that spiritual guidance, quests. <Blackfeet> They go on these quests, especially the younger people. They go on a war path, on a raid to get horses from the enemy, to count coup. Coming back, this is where they leave information about the quest that they went on, whether it's a raid, or whether it's to get horses or to take other important items from the enemy. The participants provide or give testimony by counting coup. And that gives them that status or authority to speak on certain things. They more or less qualify themselves by counting their accomplishments, their acts of bravery.

### **Sally Thompson**

Now that you've had some time to think about different ways to communicate when you don't speak the same language, pay attention to all the non-verbal communication around you. Maybe you can keep track of things you notice and share the results with your classmates or family. Are you ready? I bet you just nodded your head!