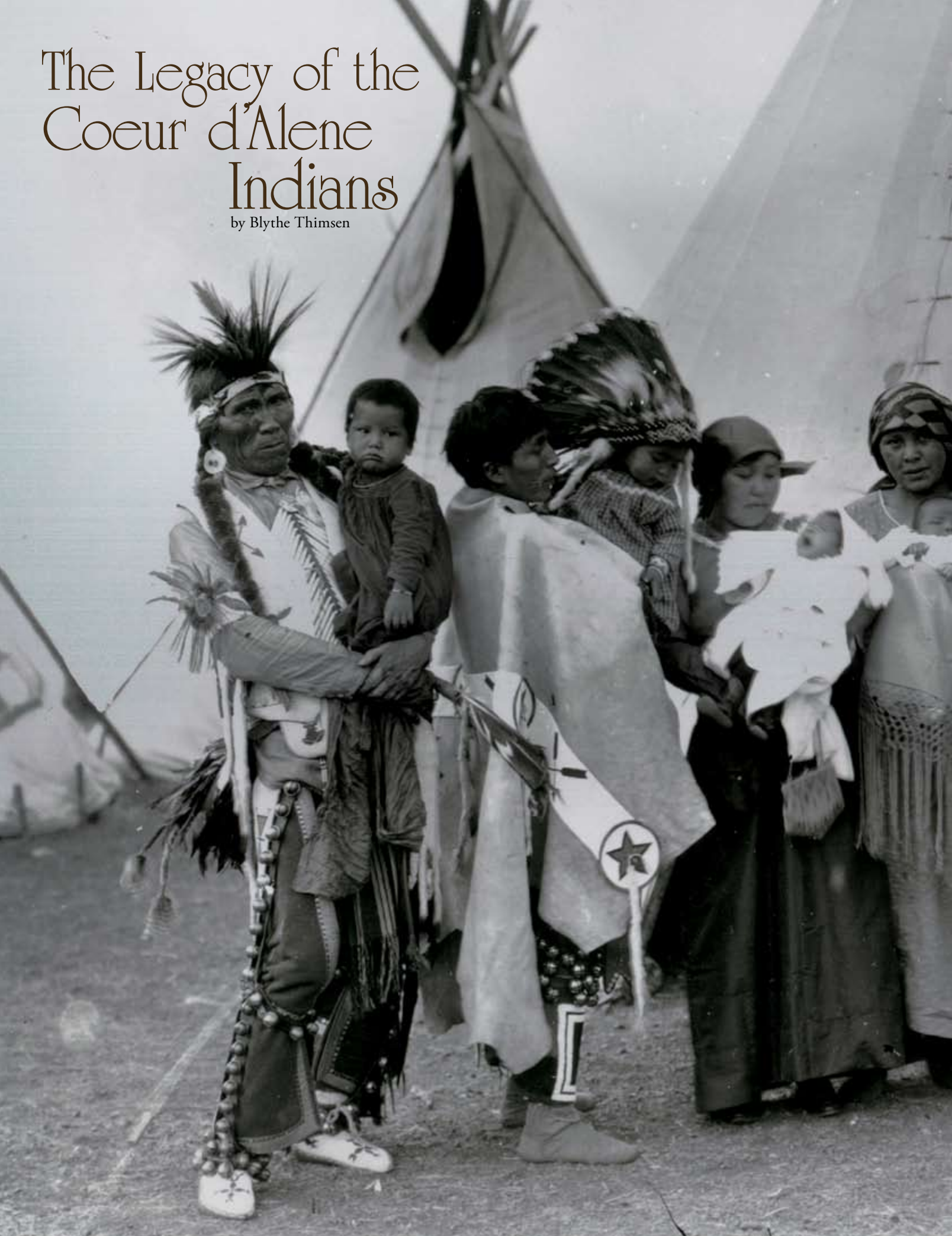


The Legacy of the Coeur d'Alene Indians

by Blythe Thimsen



LONG BEFORE ROADS CRISSCROSSED the land, and businesses, homes and lake cabins dotted the landscape, Coeur d'Alene and the surrounding area was home to the Coeur d'Alene Indians. These first inhabitants of the region, through their lives, struggles and culture, add to the rich history of life in the Northwest.

The first white men to make contact with the Coeur d'Alenes were members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, who were returning to St. Louis, Missouri, in the spring of 1806. Members of the party were offering medical treatment to members of the near-by Nez Perce tribes.

Captain Merewether Lewis wrote of the meeting in his journal: "At this place we met three men of Skeets-so-mish

who reside at the falls of a large river discharging itself into the Columbia on its east side. These people are of the same dress and appearance with the Chopennish, though their language is entirely different, a circumstance which I did not learn until we were about to set out and it was then too late to take a vocabulary."

Despite the language barrier, during this meeting, one of the Coeur d'Alenes gave Lewis a whip in exchange for a fathom of narrow binding. According to local historian Jerome Peltier, in his book *A Brief History of the Coeur d'Alene Indians*, this was the "first recorded trade between white men and the Coeur d'Alenes, and gave us the earliest known geographic description of the present Spokane River and Coeur d'Alene Lake."



Baby Show at Fair ca. 1908, Antelope Family L-R: Pete Silas (far left), Morris Antelope (fourth from right), Mary Antelope (third from right). I84-327.824



Children of the Coeur d'Alenes. Back row, unidentified. Front row, L-R: Sarah SiJohn (Škanen) and Elizabeth Cowley. 195-109.174

The Coeur d'Alenes resided in four main areas. These areas were the St. Joe River, Coeur d'Alene River and Spokane River, and it is understood that there were some families on the southern end of Pend O'reille Lake. Other camps were quite extensive around their three million plus acre, aboriginal territory.

At its peak, the Coeur d'Alene Indian population was estimated to be between 2,000 and 5,000 people, but those numbers dwindled with the years. In 1836, Samuel Parker, who explored the Northwest with missionary Marcus Whitman, estimated the population had dipped to only 700.

One cause for the decline in population was smallpox, which had struck the Coeur d'Alenes especially hard. Two recorded smallpox epidemics struck the tribe; the first in the early 1830s and the second in the 1850s. Only twenty years apart, there were some members of the tribe who endured both epidemics and knew firsthand the devastation it brought with it. By 1905, the tribal population reached a low of 500.

Nearby Indian tribes included the Spokane, Kalispel, Pend Orielle, the Flat Head, Nez Perce and Palouse. According to Peltier in *A Brief History of the Coeur d'Alene Indians*, "The Coeur d'Alenes were quite friendly with their neighbors, the Spokanes, and to a lesser extent with the Pend Orielle and Nez Perce. The Coeur d'Alene Indians had an unenviable reputation even among neighboring Indian tribes during pre-missionary days. They were so difficult to deal with, that Fr. Joseph Joset, an early Jesuit missionary among them, could not find an interpreter who could speak their language in order to communicate with them. All who dealt with them in the early days of the fur trade said that they were not generous. Fr. Joset said that the first French who made their acquaintance and who gave them their name, could not have found a more suitable one: Coeur d'Alene, heart as big as an Awl, to signify the absence of all elevated, noble and generous sentiments."

The reputation of the Coeur d'Alenes as strong and determined was well known. David Thompson, of the Northwest Company, built his trading post at Spokane House, among the Spokane, because "the

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Young Coeur d'Alene man (possible member of the Antelope family) 198-109:147

Coeur d'Alenes were very unfriendly to the fur traders and would not allow them to build a trading post among them.”

The tribe was wise to be wary of outsiders who were encroaching on their land. Throughout the 1800s a steady stream of white men headed out west, and set foot on land that had never before hosted visitors.

The Coeur d'Alenes land was expansive, covering an estimated three million acres. Though there were not yet legal boundaries, the unofficial boundaries were known and accepted by area tribes. Starting from Pend O'reille Lake, their land stretched east on the Clark Fork River, all the way to St. Regis Montana.

From there it extended south from the Montana and Idaho border to the north fork of the Clearwater River. Toward the west, the land stretched to the Palouse River, just into Washington, and headed northwest to Cheney and Spokane Falls. From there it headed northeast, back up to Sandpoint, Idaho.

In 1853, Isaac I. Stevens was introduced to the Coeur d'Alenes. He wore three hats, serving as governor of the newly formed Washington Territory, Commissioner of Indian Affairs and head of a survey crew for a transcontinental railroad route. Despite the Coeur d'Alenes' concern with the

incoming railroad, they got along well with Stevens and gave him and his party use of Sacred Heart Mission, which was on their land.

Stevens wrote, “The Coeur d'Alenes are underestimated by all the authorities. They have some seventy lodges, and number about five hundred inhabitants. They are much indebted to the good Fathers for making considerable progress in agriculture. They have abandoned polygamy, have been taught the rudiments of Christianity and are greatly improved in moral and the comforts of life. It is indeed extraordinary what the Fathers have done at the Coeur d'Alene mission.”

Christianity was introduced to the Coeur d'Alenes by an Iroquois Indian who was traveling through their land and taught them some basic teachings of Christ. According to the tribe's current-day cultural director, the Coeur d'Alenes knew about the coming of the “black robes” through one of their great chiefs who was a prophet. In 1842, Chief Andrew Seltice, chief of the Coeur d'Alenes, petitioned Fr. Peter De Smet, who was working with the Flat Head Indians, to bring a “black robe” teacher to the Coeur d'Alenes. In response, Fr. DeSmet sent Fr. Point who arrived among the Coeur d'Alenes on November 4, 1842. He dedicated a mission to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The mission was first situated on the St. Joe River and was later relocated, in 1846, to “the Old Mission” in Cataldo, Idaho. The Old Mission was abandoned in 1877, because the land was not able to sustain the tribe, and because when the U.S. Government set boundaries for the reservation, the mission was not within them.

The Coeur d'Alenes saw the white man taking over the land and, at the advice of the Jesuits, determined they needed to have legal boundaries set, to ensure they didn't lose their land. So, in 1855, they wrote to Governor Stevens, requesting that a reservation, with legally defined boundaries be established. With the governor's numerous tasks and limited time, he was unable to get to their request; instead, he put it on the back burner.

Meanwhile, other tribes were also becoming distressed about the intrusion and overall disrespect of the whites. The arguments were more heated for other tribes, coming to a head in 1855, when three Yakima tribe members murdered Yakima Indian agent A.J. Bolon; thus

started the Yakima Indian War.

Patiently waiting several years, the Coeur d'Alenes tried again to get their legal boundaries set, but the attention of the federal government was distracted by the Civil War, which had occupied the attention of the country. The tribe would have to endure longer with out legally-defined boundaries, until 1867, when President Andrew Johnson ordered a reservation be created.

President Johnson's order offered peace of mind, but it turned out to be ineffective. The Coeur d'Alenes never moved into the boundaries, and it wasn't until 1871 that they learned the boundaries of the reservation were not ones they would abide by. It only provided them with 250,000 acres of land. Four years after the boundaries were set, the tribe refused to acknowledge them.

With increasing numbers of whites moving in to the area in the late 1850s, the Coeur d'Alenes had to grapple with the whites and their quest to "civilize" them. Joseph Seltice, son of Chief Seltice, quotes in his book, *Saga of the Coeur d'Alene Indians*, "We have good homes, good lands fenced in, machinery of our own making, many horses and cattle, and beautiful stream that furnishes us with a good supply of fish. The Clearwater and Coeur d'Alene mountains supply us with meat year round, valleys give us an abundant supply of roots; wild game furnishes us with warm clothing; a beautiful Church supplies our spiritual needs. Despite the example of the packers and the judgment of generals and colonels, is this not civilization?"

He asked, "Is the land we have possessed for a thousand years really ours, or does it belong to foreign nations across the ocean who claim it at first sight?"

An 1873 Indian Commission met to negotiate a better deal for the Coeur d'Alenes. As part of the agreement, the Coeur d'Alenes' were to receive land, tools and a percentage of U.S. Bonds. What initially looked like a good deal, the treaty never came to be, because in 1873, President Grant issued an executive order to create the reservation, and the specifics that had been negotiated were left out. The Coeur d'Alenes refused to acknowledge the terms and wouldn't accept the reservation boundaries.

With the mining industry taking off, the area was flooded with whites, and they

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continued to take the Indians' land for themselves. Without any legal boundaries established, because they had refused the terms of the proposed reservations, the Coeur d'Alenes had no legal rights when it came to boundaries. Chief Andrew Seltice took an active stance in the fight, and petitioned Washington to finalize a reservation treaty that was considerate of the Indians' needs and desires.

On March 23, 1887, the Northwest Indian Commission, created by Congress, met at DeSmet mission to reach an agreement. In the book *These My Children*, author Alberta Murray describes the tentative agreement. "The Coeur d'Alenes were to keep the area included in the Executive Order of 1873. They also agreed to allow part of the Spokane Tribe to live on their reservation. It was further agreed that no part of the reservation shall ever be sold, occupied, opened to white settlement or otherwise disposed of without the consent of the Indians residing on said reservation." Additionally, the U.S. Government was to spend a hearty amount of money building schools on the land.

When presented with the agreement, however, Congress refused to approve it. Chief Seltice expressed his frustration when he wrote: "We built a strong high fence with the government; we built it round so that the ends nearly met. We done [sic] our part, but the gap that was left has never been finished by the Government in Washington. Now, you there friends, of that treaty I am doubtful. If I was not doubtful, there would not be hard work of this. That treaty is a wall we can no see through. When it comes down, we can see through and talk."

When a treaty was finally made, it included the following requirements: The Treaty of 1887 had to be accepted. Land would be purchased for \$500,000, and the funds were paid pro-rata to each member of the tribe. Ratification of this treaty occurred on March 3, 1892. Compared to their original three millions acres, the Coeur d'Alenes were left with much less land. Having lost 2,389,924 acres, the defined boundaries came at a great cost.

Throughout the tribes' struggle for defined boundaries, Chief Andrew Seltice led his people with conviction and determination. He knew what was important and would not back down. His strength and character are what made him one of

the most revered and respected chiefs. "Andrew Seltice should be marked in history high among the good and great leaders of native peoples," wrote Alberta Murray in *These My Children*.

Seltice was born in 1810, although the exact date is not known, to a Coeur d'Alene father and a Spokane mother. After serving as sub-chief, he was elected head of the Coeur d'Alene tribe. Their chiefs were not passed on by family; chiefs were elected. After serving as sub-chief, the then-chief, Chief Vincent, realized Andrew Seltice was greatly respected



Chief Seltice of the Coeur d'Alenes
194-14.91

among the Coeur d'Alenes, so he stepped down, knowing the tribe would be in good hands with Seltice leading them.

According to Chief Joseph Seltice, one of Andrew Seltice's sons, in his book *Saga of the Coeur d'Alene Indians*, "The chief's orders were law, and everyone followed them. He was the officer of the law and went about his work without worrying about any salary. He worked for the betterment of the tribe, and for everyone else as well as for himself. Everyone respected law and order; crime barely existed, and

jail was unknown."

Just as everyone respected the chief's orders as law, they also respected the decisions he made and the wisdom and insight he possessed. Seltice was a man of exceptional wisdom. He could foresee that interaction with the white man was inevitable, and he made it known that educating his people in the way of the white man was necessary for the tribe's well being.

He also knew when to get involved and when it was better for his tribe to remain impartial. "At the uprising of the Nez Perce in 1877, the Coeur d'Alenes were asked to join Chief Joseph and his warriors, but Andrew Seltice, now Head Chief, gracefully declined," wrote Murray in *These My Children*.

Seltice served as chief of the Coeur d'Alenes for 37 years. During that time he was married twice and fathered twenty-five children, including Joseph Seltice who was elected chief in 1932. After years of service and hard work, Chief Andrew Seltice began losing his eyesight around 1900. As he began to deteriorate, and saw the loss of his longtime friends and family, Seltice was ready to leave this world.

"Lot is dead. All my friends are gone, and I am alone. I want to die," he said at the death of his dear friend, a Spokane chief named Lot. After a long and well-lived life, filled with fighting on behalf of his tribe, Seltice was tired, physically and emotionally.

He developed pneumonia in the spring of 1902. Issued by the Coeur d'Alenes, surrounding tribes received invitations to his funeral before he died, but Seltice had different plans. He asked his son, Peter, to ensure that his funeral was not a public gathering; he only wanted family and friends to attend. He passed away on April 29, 1902. To fulfill his wishes, and to ensure his burial was private, Seltice was buried at 4 a.m.

As he was laid to rest in the early morning hours, the sun began to rise overhead, brining with it a new day and new leadership for the Coeur d'Alenes. What promised to be the same is that they would be a strong presence in this community, something that continues today. It is in part because of the Coeur d'Alenes, that our region has such a rich history. ■