

ROCK CREEK  
Past and Present

Written by  
C.H. Siria  
1937 04 1938

Rock Creek drains a part of the Deerlodge and Lolo National Forest. It has its source in the high mountains of the Continental Divide that borders the north end of Big Hole Basin, and empties into the Clarks Fork River 22 miles east of Missoula. It is a large stream, in fact too large to be called creek, as it runs more water at most seasons of the year than the main Clarks Fork River where it unites with this stream. Rock Creek is approximately 80 miles in length and drains well over a million acres of land. Except in the mountains at its extreme head, the upper drainage consists to a large extent of low rolling hills and shallow basins. The lower end runs through rough and rugged country.

In ancient times this stream did not flow as it does today. At that time it probably consisted of a chain of lakes which drained out through the wide Flint Creek Valley to the east of its present course. In the early ages a great earth movement took place. It may have been at the time the Osborn fault occurred which runs in a general easterly and westerly direction through a large section of Western Montana and forms the present bed of the main Clarks Fork River. This earth movement resulted in a change in the direction of the flow of Rock Creek. Instead of flowing down through the Flint Creek Valley, it cut a course directly through the heart of the Sapphire Range of mountains. This accounts for the rough topography of the lower half of the drainage which is characterized by high, steep ridges and narrow V-shaped valleys. Erosion, however, has softened the roughness of this area and today we find many long open bunch-grass ridges sloping into Rock Creek.

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Creek. They were awakened one morning at about daybreak by sounds of movement outside the cabin. Looking through the hole between the logs of the cabin, they discovered that they were surrounded by Indians who all appeared to be armed with rifles. Being wholly unprepared to put up a fight against such odds, they decided to try and make friends with the Indians. They invited them in to have breakfast and two of the Indians entered the Cabin. Breakfast was started and one prospector started for the spring for a bucket of water. About the time he reached the spring, the Indians killed him. One of the men remaining in the cabin saw what occurred and exclaimed to his partner to make a break for it. Two of them were killed instantly. Jones ran out of the cabin door knocking down one of the Indians. The Indians were momentarily confused and Jones succeeded in reaching a deep wash which had resulted from their placer operations. He tumbled into this and was out of sight of the Indians for a moment. He started running down the wash with the Indians after him, the Indians shooting whenever they caught sight of Jones, hitting him once in the shoulder but not causing a serious wound. They kept up the chase all day long covering about 12 miles of rough, mountainous country. About the time Jones played out, the Indians ran out of ammunition but they didn't give up the chase. Jones states that he attempted to keep above the Indians and at times held them off by throwing rocks down on them. Finally, along towards evening the Indians gave up the chase and Jones staggered into the nearest settlement to tell his story. He has ever since gone by the name of "Nez Perce Jones."

Charley Pomprey was the first settler on the extreme lower Rock Creek. He settled in 1883. He was followed in 1887 by Peter Walback who is still here. The first two years after he came to Rock Creek, Walback and his partner fished and hunted for the market. They sold fish and game to the gold miners and railroad construction crews. Walback states that they received 25¢ per pound for trout and 11¢ per pound for venison dressed. About 500# of fish were caught per

week. He states an average day's catch was 20 pounds per man which required about four hours fishing time. All fish were taken with ordinary fly hook. He reports killing 32 deer one winter. Other hunters, he states, killed a larger number. He tells of a fish basket constructed by the Indians on Rock Creek near the mouth of Ranch Creek in 1884. This trap was in operation for several years and he remembers seeing hundreds of dead fish in the trap each year after the Indians pulled out. The Indians didn't take the trouble to put the trap out of working order before they left and it would fill up with fish that eventually died. This wanton destruction of wild life held full sway for years, climaxing in the great slaughter of the winter of 1889 and 1890. That winter four men came into the country to trap for coyotes and other fur-bearing animals. They had no traps but a plentiful supply of poison. The deer were concentrated on the winter ranges and could be killed in large numbers without any effort. These men are thought to have killed three or four hundred head of deer and poisoned the carusses that winter. The fur catch was small and of little value as prices for this kind of fur were low.

Gold was discovered on lower Welcome Creek, a tributary of lower Rock Creek, by Peter Walback in 1888 but not in paying quantities. The rich placer strike on upper Welcome Creek was made in 1890 by a man whose name, according to Mr. Walback's memory, was Smith. These diggings were moderately rich and were mined successfully for a number of years. One of the largest nuggets ever found in Montana came from Welcome Creek and its value was between \$400.00 and \$500.00 at \$20.00 per ounce. Over the hills a short distance from Welcome Creek on Harvey Creek was found the largest nugget ever to be uncovered in the state valued at \$1300.00.

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Alternate entrances to the Hell Gate from the Missoula Valley were by way of Pattee and Deer Creek Canyons on the south, and over a shoulder of Mount Jumbo to the north.

From encampments south up the Bitterroot Valley the Flatheads often crossed the Sapphire Mountains via Skalkaho Pass to the headwaters of Rock Creek, then followed down that stream to its junction with the Clark Fork. A similar trail ran from the head of Rock Creek over the John Long Mountains to the Flint Creek Valley and down it to the Hell Gate. A circuitous third looped from the upper Flint Creek drainage through the Anaconda and Deer Lodge Valleys to the eastern entrance of the canyon. Additional roads linked the Deer Lodge trail with the Silver Bow Valley to the east and with Missouri, Yellowstone, and Snake River trails through the Big Hole Basin to the south.<sup>12</sup>

Hell Gate Canyon was accessible from the east through both the Deer Lodge Valley and the Little Blackfoot drainage. And from the Blackfoot Valley on the north, trails came in over the Garnet Range to join the south fork of the old Salish road at Clinton, at Bearmouth, and at the Flint Creek-Clark Fork junction near the present town of Drummond.<sup>13</sup>

In summary, then, a network of prehistoric trails connected Hell Gate Canyon with other valleys and regions, despite the ruggedness of much of the intervening terrain.

The entire region was a favorite hunting, trapping, and gathering ground of the Flatheads, and certain areas, particularly the Deer Lodge Valley just southeast of Hell Gate Canyon, were also used as hunting grounds by the Snakes, Bannocks, Nez Perce, Pend d'Oreille, Spokanes, Coeur d'Alene, and Kutenai.<sup>14</sup>

Aged Flathead informants recall a number of customary campgrounds in the Hell Gate area. Proceeding upriver from Missoula these included the present site of Milltown at the junction of the Big Blackfoot and Clark Fork Rivers, where the Flatheads had a bull trout fishery; the vicinity of Clinton; the Beavertail Hill locality; the Deep Creek country north of Bearmouth; and the vicinity of Drummond. Red pigments were secured near Drummond, and flint and pipestone quarries were located on the upper limits of Flint Creek.<sup>15</sup> The present survey found archaeological remains from these sites at Beavertail Hill and Drummond only. The Flint Creek Valley was not included in the survey.

Members of the Lewis and Clark expedition were the first white men in the Hell Gate area. On July 4, 1806, Lewis and nine men entered the canyon from the Missoula Valley, en route to the falls of the Missouri River on their return from the Pacific. Their Nez Perce Indian guides refused to go farther than the canyon's entrance, for fear of encountering the dreaded Blackfoot. The party followed the old Salish road to the mouth of the Big Blackfoot, then turned north up that river along the left branch of the trail.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Malouf, Land Use, 37, 42-43; Ogden, Snake Country Journals, XIII, 65-75; Stuart, Forty Years, I, 141-147.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, "Trading Expedition," III, 47-48.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart, Forty Years, I, 204.

<sup>15</sup> Malouf, Land Use, 33-38, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Thwaites, Journals of Lewis and Clark, V, 188.

From: An archaeological Survey of the  
Missoula Valley. Fall, 1952  
Moomaw, Cannon, Hogg

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was the area on the University side of the river by the Van Buren bridge. Another camping site was in the country surrounding the present site of the Mountain View theatre, (letter "C" on map of Missoula County in appendix).

Mrs. Big Sam also knows of a burial mound on the West Fork of the Bitterroot River, and says that there is good evidence of camp site here from the last century. She also knows of an archaeological site on the Grant Creek by DeSmet, Montana. This site goes back before her time. It is near the place where the stream emerges from the mountains and is probably within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of the DeSmet railroad station.

It was possible to learn the Salish names for some of the places in this area from Mrs. Big Sam. Missoula was called Isai meaning "bulltrout". Bonner was Aicestum, which is like the name for bull-trout in meaning, except more and larger trout were found at this place. Arlee was Inloga, (no meaning given) and Evaro was Senpo. Senpo was a prominent camping site when the Indians were going between Arlee (Inloga) and the Bitterroot Valley.

Study of Specific Areas in the Fish Creek Region

A letter from a George Hankinson was received by Professor Malouf late in the spring of 1952 and it was decided to talk with Mr. Hankinson and investigate some of the areas in which he had found artifacts. Mr. Hankinson's letter will serve as an introduction to the study in this portion of the paper.