For millennia, the Missoula Valley has been a place of great importance to our people, the Séliš (SEH-leesh, also known as ‘Salish’ or ‘Flathead’) and Ql̓ispé (Kah-lee-SPEH, also known as ‘Kalispel’ or ‘Pend d’Oreille’).

This is a vital part of our aboriginal territories, a landscape filled with cultural meaning, reflected in the selected place-names on this sign. Some names come from our creation stories. Others refer to our traditional way of life and the resources, such as bull trout, that were particularly abundant here. The confluence of Rattlesnake Creek and the Clark Fork River is known as Nɫʔaycčstm, meaning Place of Small Bull Trout. The shortened form of this name, Nɫʔay, is used by Salish speakers to refer to the city of Missoula.

The west side of the valley, including the prairies around Fort Missoula, was the greatest bitterroot digging ground in all of our vast aboriginal territories. Until the 1960s, when development made it impossible to continue, our people gathered here every spring to offer prayers of thanks for this staple food and dig for several weeks.

In 1855, just a few miles west of this sign, our tribal nations met with U.S. officials to negotiate the Hellgate Treaty. The treaty established the sovereign Flathead Reservation, and guaranteed our continued use of tribal homelands for traditional purposes.

Today, Séliš and Ql̓ispé people maintain a vital connection to the Missoula area. We are active members of the community, engaging in this transformed world even as we maintain and revitalize our connection to the ancestors.

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