

# CHARLO (ca. 1830–1910)

## SALISH PATRIOT

Charlo—*Slem-hak-kah* (*Little Claw of a Grizzly Bear*)—was born about 1830, in the Bitterroot Valley of western Montana. The son of Salish chief Victor, he became the tribe's hereditary leader upon his father's death in 1870. For 40 years he defended Salish treaty rights against the machinations of the federal government. Charlo, a devout Christian, consistently placed the welfare of his followers above personal gain.

By the signing of the Hellgate Treaty in 1855 the United States government considered efforts to place the Salish on a reservation in the Bitterroot Valley, their ancestral homeland. In 1871, however, a Presidential Order categorically directed their removal to the Jocko (Flathead) Reservation, north of Missoula. The next year, special commissioner James A. Garfield negotiated an agreement, signed by subchiefs Arlee and Adolf, to effect the removal. Although Charlo never signed the document, published versions included his mark. When Arlee led part of the tribe to the Jocko agency, Charlo and several hundred Salish followers remained in the Bitterroot.

During the 20 years of negotiations with the federal government that followed, Charlo maintained his stand on the tribe's legal right to a home in the Bitterroot Valley. Finally, in 1891—because

his followers continued to suffer—Charlo reluctantly agreed to leave the Bitterroot in return for the special care of his people. For three days in October, Charlo led his Salish contingent on Montana's own "Trail of Tears" to the Flathead Reservation.

A frustrated, disillusioned leader, Charlo brooded:

*"[The white man's] laws never gave us a blade, nor a tree, nor a duck, nor a grouse, nor a trout. No. Like the wolverine that steals your cache, how often does he come? You know he comes as long as he lives. He takes more and more, and he dirties what he leaves."*

Charlo died on the Flathead Reservation on January 10, 1910, a Salish patriot to the end.

