

THE STORY OF WILD HORSE ISLAND

(Kootenai)



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This is a true story of how the bighorn sheep got to Wild Horse Island located in Flathead Lake near Dayton, Montana. The story of Wild Horse Island was told by Mary Louise Starr who actually took part in the event. She now lives in Elmo, Montana.

The bighorn sheep were brought to Wild Horse Island from British Columbia, Canada by Frank Phillips, Mary Louise Starr and Dave Mahseela of the Kootenai Tribe. Canada is a beautiful country, vast and open. Frank knew the country well because he had grown up there. He knew exactly where to find bighorn sheep. At that time, Frank, Mary and Dave were living at Dog Lake near Hot Springs, Montana. They decided that the best time to make a trip to catch sheep would be in June. The new lambs would be born then and they would be easy to catch.

They left for Canada and when they arrived, they were joined by three men. A hunting and fishing party was formed. The party camped on the South Fork of the Wigwam River. Sheep Mountain lay just north of them. After a week of hunting and fishing, Frank and Dave departed for Sheep Mountain. They had no problem finding the sheep. Eagles circled above the new lambs, hoping to spot a sick or injured lamb that might provide a meal. Once the men saw the eagles off in the distance they simply continued in that direction. There they found a large herd with many new lambs.

Catching the lambs was more difficult than the men had anticipated, however. The first two attempts were hopeless. These little animals were surefooted and agile, even at their young age. Dave made a snare from his shoelaces and was successful in catching the first two lambs. They were both rams. Dave and Frank released one. Later they caught two more and kept a ewe.

Removing the young lambs from the mountain was another problem. Keeping them well fed and healthy was very important. Frank had to take milk from three different white tail does to feed the baby lambs. Once off the mountain, Frank moved the sheep to the Phillips ranch near by. They stayed long enough for the lambs to adjust to cows' milk and a new life.

After a few weeks had passed, Frank felt the lambs were ready to make the trip to Dayton, so they began the trip back. Late one afternoon, they stopped to rest at Black Creek near Stryker, Montana. This was a usual rest stop for the Kootenai people who traveled this route. When they were ready to leave, the lambs were

nowhere to be found. The party looked everywhere. It was Mary who finally discovered them. She had given up looking for them and sat down on the grass beside the car. To her surprise there they were sound asleep under the car. The rest of the trip was uneventful and they returned home safely.

By midsummer, the lambs had adjusted well and were playful, strong sheep. The rest of the summer was spent moving from place to place, as Frank looked for work. Wherever Frank and his family went, they took the lambs along. It was hard work keeping the lambs from wandering off. They might fall prey to wild animals or become injured.

Finally, in late summer the lambs were taken to the subagency near Polson. Frank and his family lived there with a man named Pat Shea. Pat built a pen for the lambs, but it wasn't long before the lambs found ways to get out and wander off.

The time had come to move the lambs to Wild Horse Island. There on the island they would be free to wander and no harm would come to them. The lambs were loaded into rowboats and taken across the lake to their new home. The sheep are still there today and the once small herd multiplied. Today it is such a large herd that State and Tribal Wildlife Enforcement Control has moved some of them to various places on or near the Flathead Reservation.