



## Amazing Montanans—Biography

### Chief Charlo, Little Claw of the Grizzly Bear

When the 1855 Treaty of Hell Gate was negotiated at Council Groves, Victor, Standing Grizzly Bear, was the principal leader of the Salish Tribe living in the Bitterroot Valley. After Victor's death in 1871, his son Charlo, Little Claw of the Grizzly Bear, became chief by consent of the Tribe. Traditional leaders led by example and maintained their positions through their character. Honesty, generosity, and courage were all qualities necessary for leadership.

Chief Charlo held a deep love for his homeland and his people. He intended to remain in the Bitterroot Valley, as he believed that the Treaty of Hell Gate promised to create a reservation there for his people. In fact, the treaty did state that a survey of the Bitterroot would be done to determine if it would be good for Charlo and his people. However, a survey was never done and the settlers and government pressured Charlo to move up to the reservation in the Mission Valley. Charlo kept reminding the government of their promise to survey the land in the Bitterroot Valley and even traveled to Washington DC to tell government officials in person of their obligation to keep their promise. The Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai had kept their word and Charlo was angry that the government was not keeping theirs. In 1872, Congress passed an act that ordered the Salish to move. The government sent U.S. Commissioner James Garfield to get Chief Charlo to sign a contract to agree to move. Chief Charlo responded by saying, "I will never sign your paper...My heart belongs to this valley. I will never leave it." Later the contract was published in with a mark appearing as Charlo's. He maintained that he never signed it. The handwritten contract had no mark by Charlo's name, just as he had said.



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*The great Chief Charlot, Flathead Reservation, circa 1908 –Photograph by N.A. Forsyth. Stereograph Collection*

Charlo managed to remain in the Bitterroot Valley until 1891. Settlers surrounded the remaining Salish, and they pressured the government to move the Salish out. Poor conditions among the Salish were increased due to recent crop failures, and Charlo finally relented and move.

After moving to the reservation, Chief Charlo soon had to engage in another battle. That fight was to prevent reservation lands from being broken up into individual allotments. Again, he traveled to Washington DC to protest. His protest made no difference and in his last years saw the land divided. Chief Charlo passed away in 1910; the year reservation lands were opened to homesteading.