

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

TEACHER AND STUDENT READING BIOGRAPHY OF GUSTAV SOHON



Photograph of artist Gustav Sohon. As an artist, Sohon was a product of his time and his depictions of treaty events reflect this. His drawings and watercolor paintings allow everyone who views them to see, through his eyes, the treaty councils between the United States Government and Indian tribes of the Pacific Northwest. Courtesy of the Sohon Private Collection.

Born in 1825 in Belgium, Gustav Sohon was educated in Tilsit, Germany. He immigrated to the United States in 1842, and in the early 1850s, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. Upon his enlistment he was stationed in the west, and eventually found his way to Fort Steilacoom, Washington Territory. One of his first assignments was with Lieutenant John Mullan, who was surveying the country between the Rocky and Bitterroot Mountains for the railroad survey led by Isaac Stevens.

Sohon Reaches the Northwest

From that moment on, Sohon witnessed and contributed to some of the most important events in the history of the Northwest. As an army private, he served with the Stevens railroad survey for over a year before Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens noticed his artistic ability. Sohon traveled with Governor Isaac Stevens on his historic campaign of 1855: the Treaty Trail, where he documented events of the journey

and treaty councils with Native American tribes. Sohon proved to have a flair for languages, and was soon fluent in the Flathead and Pend d'Oreille languages. He could communicate with the Native peoples, and many allowed him to draw pictures of them.

Sohon was also a talented painter, who produced accurate landscapes and vivid scenes from native life, including the first panoramic view of the Rocky Mountains and the earliest-known sketch of the Great Falls of the Missouri.

What is a landscape?

To an artist, a **landscape** is art that represents a place in the natural environment.



The detail of the painting "Crossing the Bitter Roots, Nov. 1855" by Gustav Sohon depicts his 1855 journey with the Stevens party through the Bitterroot Mountains. Two men and several horses or mules are following a steep trail through a snow-covered landscape. Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

The End of Army Life

Sohon's five-year enlistment ended in July 1857. He then sought out his earlier friend and mentor, Lieutenant John Mullan. Mullan was leading the construction of a military road from Walla Walla to Fort Benton, and Sohon surveyed routes and kept track of the construction progress. In 1860 Sohon guided the first wagon party to cross the Rocky and Bitterroot Mountains to the Columbia Plateau by a route other than the more commonly used Overland Trail. When Mullan's Road was complete, Sohon went with him to Washington, DC, to assist in the preparation of topographical data, maps, and illustrations for a report on the road's construction. He never returned to the Northwest.

Marriage and Family

In April 1863, Gustav Sohon and Julianna Groh were married. For a brief time they lived in San Francisco, where Sohon ran a photography studio. Several years later, they returned to Washington, DC, where Sohon disappeared from public life, running a shoe business and raising a large family with Julianna. He died on September 9, 1903.

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This painting by Sohon, "Bloods Come into Council, Blackfoot Country, 1855", portrays the artist's perspective of a scene at the Blackfeet Council with four Blood Indians riding into camp on horseback. Two men in the foreground, one carrying a large American flag and shooting a gun into the air. The other man also has a firearm and is holding the bottom corner of the flag. In the background are two women on horseback. One horse is pulling a travois. Both women's horses have decorated collars or martingales. Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

Sources:

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