

We Come From Right Here

For many years scholars theorized that the Blackfeet migrated east-to-west from the forests of the Great Lakes sometime in the last few hundred years. This was based on analyzing variations in Algonquin dialects (the Blackfeet language is classified by linguists as Algonquin) and concluding that we must have taken the language from east-to-west. Explanations for the Blackfeet's supposed migration ranged from the introduction of the horse and gun to conflict with other tribes.



But scholars write books and give lectures and huff and puff about times in which they never lived, worlds into which they never stepped foot, and languages they can never hear spoken by the ancients they study. As an example of how little is really known about Indians in the pre-Columbian period, experts can't even agree if the population of the Americas was 8 million or 112 million. If they know so little that they can't get within an order of magnitude of each other, why bother guessing about anything else?

Why, if it is generally agreed that Indians came across from Asia 12,000 or more years ago

(which naturally means migration would occur north-to-south, and west-to-east) would anyone claim the Blackfeet must have migrated east-to-west?

In any case, anthropological theories aren't interesting to the Blackfeet. We know who we are and where we come from. **We come from right here.** We know, and have always said, that we have forever lived next to the Rocky Mountains. And we are right: recent archeological evidence shows that for thousands of years we have lived where we now live. There is a nearby buffalo jump that has buffalo bones mixed in with our bones that are over 6,000 years old.

Not that we needed any proof: Our Creation Story, handed down through a hundred generations, takes place at Badger-Two Medicine, a sacred place next to what is today the Blackfeet Reservation and Glacier Park. If a scholar wants to tell us that somewhere in the dark and distant mists of prehistory we walked from Asia, or came by raft across one ocean or another, we will listen and smile, because we like our Creation Story better.

From the time the white man came, and in fact *because* the white man came, our population has varied wildly, from perhaps 20,000 in the early 1800s, to possibly fewer than 2,000 in the 1890s, to over 16,000 today. Our grim mortality rate has been due to countless collisions between our tribe and non-Indians (Indians waged war on each other from time to time, but not necessarily to kill, and never with the aim of extermination). This is another way to say that left to our own abilities and able to make our own decisions, even in the most unforgiving of environments we have always flourished.

In 1837 smallpox was unwittingly brought by white men. Just ten days after visiting Fort McKenzie, Montana, the Blackfeet awoke to terrible and incurable symptoms of an unknown horror that quickly raged through the entire tribe. We lost 6,000 --half our tribe.

In the 1880s we came close to losing everyone to the Starvation Winter: Our numbers were diminished to perhaps less than 3,000. This occurred due to the near complete annihilation of the buffalo which represented 90% of our diet. (In the 1870s there were 5,000,000 buffalo on the Plains, five years later they were all but gone.) No one told us the buffalo had been wiped out until it was too late, and no one in Washington, D.C. truly understood how reliant we were on the animal. By the time the federal government realized its tragic mistake, we were dying in

droves. Help came too little, too late, and if it weren't for the good people of Montana rushing us food across nearly impassible terrain, there might today be no Blackfeet Tribe at all.

And of course war with invading white soldiers, against whose numbers and guns we didn't stand a chance, depleted us in numbers, stature, and spirit at every turn.



In our “Dog Days” (when we use dogs to pull our travois from encampment to encampment) and into the horse and gun era which began about 1750, we relentlessly roamed the Plains following the enormous herds of buffalo. The moment our scouts came back with news of a herd, we would instantly pack up the entire camp and be in pursuit in a matter of minutes. The tipi enabled our mobile lifestyle, and that venerable lodge has never been improved on. In all the world, what other large, lightweight, portable home has proven equal to the tipi's unique ability to withstands prairie winds so powerful that a strong man can barely stand up, buffer its inhabitants from killing cold, and house a large family in such great comfort, yet be easily taken down or set up in minutes?

Before guns we used arrows and lances and sometimes allied with the Gros Ventre and Sarcee to fight our traditional enemies the Crow, Shoshone, Cree, Sioux, Flathead, and Assiniboin. Once we were mounted and armed with guns, we quickly came to dominate the Northern Plains, pushing the Shoshone, Kootenai, and Flathead to the western side of the Rocky Mountains, and every other challenger to distant domains.

Controlling such a large region, rich in wildlife, made us a natural and necessary trading partner

for the fur trappers that started to appear in the mid-18th century. For over 100 years thereafter, trading with European trappers and traders was an important part of our economy and social lives.

But we had long been aggressive warriors and raiders, and so we would sometimes attack trading posts and raid settlements. This terrified settlers, so it was just a matter of time before governments and armies got involved. They were after our land in any case, and they would get it by hook, crook, or force. Our fearsome reputation gave them just the excuse needed to take a hard line with us. So before we knew what had happened we had ceded the vast majority of our lands to the federal government through treaties and other agreements that we were not equipped to negotiate or even understand.

The first treaty, known as Lane Bull's Treaty, was signed in 1855. More would follow, each taking huge chunks of our traditional land. We resisted as best we could, but retaliation was always disproportionate and murderous. In 1870, for example, a small confrontation sparked by the relentless, illegal encroachment of settlers and speculators resulted in the indiscriminate massacre of 173 women, children, and elderly by the U.S. Cavalry at Heavy Runner's Piegan camp on the Marias River. This was a peaceful camp under the protection of a safe conduct pass. It wasn't the camp the soldiers were hunting for. A Calvary scout named Kipp frantically shouted to the soldiers that this was the wrong camp and they were about to make a terrible mistake. But bloodlust and hatred cannot be diverted by right or reason, and this was our Wounded Knee, our Sand Creek.

In the end, as a small grace, we ended up with the land that was most sacred to us: our present day reservation. But this was not due to any sort of good will or best intentions on the part of the United States. The simple fact is that the land we wanted most was the land they wanted least.

In 1896 we had the Northern Rockies taken from us for a paltry \$1.5 million because speculators believed there were rich minerals to be had. When mineral riches didn't pan out, this most sacred part of our homeland became Glacier National Park in 1910. As recently as 1925, Glacier National Park was still pressuring us to give up more land surrounding the Park.

To this day we question the legitimacy of the 1896 transaction. But thereafter, the modern-day

reservation boundaries were essentially set, and lands within the reservation were allotted to individual Tribal members between 1907 and 1911 under the General Allotment Act. On the surface, the idea was to distribute reservation land to individual Indians, but in practice the Act enabled non-Indians to buy (or fleece) allotments from Indians or to purchase “excess lands.” On some reservations, for example the Puyallup Reservation near Seattle, nearly all the land quickly left Tribal hands as it was purchased for pennies from Tribal members desperate for cash or seized for non-payment of taxes, and then developed into a drab and sprawling low- and middle-income suburb for non-Indians. Today, no one passing through the Puyallup Reservation would have the slightest notion they are on an Indian reservation, except for the occasional smokeshop or firework stand.



By comparison, the Blackfeet fared much better: Today, over 60% of the reservation remains in Tribal or Tribal-member hands, and the portions we don't own are generally very large ranches with few structures and fewer inhabitants. Our non-Indian ranchers are good neighbors and good stewards of the land, so the character and appearance of our rangelands has remained essentially unaltered since early times. Over 8,500 of the Reservation's 10,000 residents are enrolled Blackfeet. The other 1,500 are mostly Blackfeet descendants or Indians from other tribes, as well as a few hundred non-Indians.

In 1924, American Indians became U.S. citizens. In 1934, we became an "IRA Tribe" under the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. This stemmed the tide of reservation land being sold to non-Indians by conferring trust land status on much of our acreage, and also formed the legal basis for sovereignty, bestowed a measure self-governance, and provided a Tribal Constitution-based structure for our government.

Prior to the early 20th century it was uncommon for Blackfeet to be sufficiently skilled at writing to make good chroniclers for the Tribe. So, much of the best writings about us came from non-Indians that we welcomed into our world. Below are excerpts from an essay written in the 1930s by a longtime, trusted friend, a man named Frank B. Linderman. It's from his book: "OUT OF THE NORTH: A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE BLACKFEET INDIAN TRIBE" and is a very good, lively, and romantic read. (Many Blackfeet would not agree with some of the statements made herein, but anyone who would take such trouble to learn about us and write so affectionately and sympathetically deserves to be heard uncensored.)

BLACKFEET! No tribal name appears oftener in the history of the Northwestern plains; no other is so indelibly written into the meager records of the early fur-trade of the upper Missouri river, and none ever inspired more dread in white plainsmen. Hell-gate* was not so named because the water there was fiercely wild, or the mountain trail difficult, but because the way led from tranquility to trouble, to the lands of the hostile Blackfeet. *Near Missoula, Montana. Gateway through the Rockies to the plains.

The three tribes of the Blackfeet nation, the Pecunnies (Piegans), Bloods, and Blackfeet, are one people. They speak a common language, and practice the same customs. Long ago...they reached the wide plains bordering the Rocky mountains in what is now Montana. Here they found vast herds of fat buffalo, elk, and antelope, an exhaustless abundance they had never known; and here, after driving the Snakes, and probably the Flatheads, Kootenais, and Nez Perces, from the bountiful grass-lands to the narrow valleys west of the Rockies, the three tribes of Blackfeet settled down to become plainsmen. Nobody can tell their numbers when they came out of the north. Old Pecunnie warriors have told me that their tribe once counted 750 lodges, probably less than 4000 people; and we know that, of the three tribes of the Blackfeet nation, the Pecunnie was the most numerous.

All this happened before the Blackfeet had horses. Dogs had always transported their goods. Now, to steal horses, their raiding parties ranged over the endless grass-lands far toward the south, old warriors say even into the Spanish possessions. Often these raiders were absent for

two years; and nearly always they were successful. Their pony-bands grew until men measured their wealth in horses. Meat, their principal food, was easily obtained; and yet these people did not permit life to drag, or become stale. War and horse-stealing were their never-ending games; and besides furnishing necessary excitement and adventure they kept every man in constant training, since a successful raid was certain to bring attempts at reprisal. To be mentioned by his tribesmen as a great warrior, or a cunning horse-thief, was the highest ambition of a plains Indian; and the Blackfeet were master-hands at both these hazardous hobbies.

When finally they obtained fire-arms they became the scourge of the Northwestern plains, claiming all the country lying north of the Yellowstone river to the Saskatchewan. In stature they average taller than the men of neighboring tribes, having thin, shapely noses, and intelligent faces. Like the other tribesmen of the great grasslands they were naturally a deeply religious people; and like all the plains Indians they were naturally jolly, loving jest and laughter when not in the presence of strangers.

Even though the Blackfeet may have brought their social customs from the northern forests, they did not differ greatly from those of the other plains people. Each of the three tribes was subdivided into clans, or gentes of blood kin in the male line, there being in the Blackfeet nation perhaps fifty such clans known as Black-Elks, Lone- Fighters, Fat-Roasters, White-Breasts, etc. A man was not permitted by tribal law to marry a woman who belonged to his own clan; and the children of any union belonged always to their mother's clan. Young women were closely guarded. There was little courting. Marriages were arranged by parents, with the consent of near relations. And yet, when possible, the desires of young people were given consideration.



