

DENVER ART MUSEUM

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DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

WILLENA D. CARTWRIGHT, CURATOR

FREDERIC H. DOUGLAS, EDITOR



BLACKFOOT WOMEN IN FULL DRESS
(American Museum of Natural History)

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THE BLACKFOOT INDIANS

THE BLACKFOOT INDIANS are a semi-nomadic, non-agricultural, hunting people belonging to the Algonkin linguistic stock. There are three divisions of the confederacy, the Blackfoot proper, or Siksika, the Blood, or Kainah, and the Piegan, or Pikuni. The Blackfoot, Blood and a few Piegan live on three reservations in southwestern Alberta, and the main body of the Piegan on a reservation in northwestern Montana, directly east of Glacier National Park. The total 1954 population of the three is about 7,000-7,500, an increase over 1931. The Piegan were about 55% full blood in 1910. The Piegan number as many as the other divisions combined.

HISTORY. Tribal traditions as to the prehistoric wanderings of the tribe are so vague that nothing can be said surely about this matter. The language is so very different from other Algonkin tongues that the separation from the main body of the stock must have occurred very long ago. When first visited by the white man, probably about 1750, the three tribes were ranging over an immense area immediately east of the Rockies, centering on the headwaters of the Saskatchewan river in Alberta and ranging north to the Peace River and south to the Yellowstone. The eastern limit was in the neighborhood of the present Saskatoon and Regina in Saskatchewan. Before the coming of the horse in the early 18th century the tribes remained in the western part of their territory. But with the means of easy travel they wandered far and wide, going over the mountains to Salt Lake and south to New Mexico. Not until 1860 was there any considerable penetration of their country by the whites, and only after 1880 did it become extensive. Hence they retained their original culture much longer than many other tribes. When first found the tribe seems to have numbered about 10,000. Epidemics and starvation caused by the extinction of the buffalo in 1883 caused the greatest reduction in their numbers.

HABITAT. The home of the Blackfoot is a great expanse of rolling prairie country, broken by gulches and bad lands and small ranges of mountains. On the west are the foothills of the Rockies, which are in general not visited much by the tribes, since they are a plains rather than a mountain people.

PHYSIQUE. The people are tall and very well built, many of the men being six feet high and broad in proportion. They have long heads, high cheekbones, large noses, black hair and brown skin. The women are proportionately large and are often very handsome.

TRIBAL ORGANIZATION. The three tribes of the confederacy are split up into bands, the members of which are to a very large extent related through the male line. The exceptions are persons who have come in from other bands, such transfers being very easily accomplished. Some writers have supposed that the bands were true gentes or groups related in the male line, but available evidence is against this theory. Each band had a head man who was chosen for ability in war and peacetime leadership and especially for the possession of wealth and the willingness to dispense this wealth for the public good. Each of the tribes had a head chief, not regularly elected, but generally agreed upon by the leaders. This office was not hereditary, but was quite likely to be kept in one band. All matters were decided in councils of the band

leaders and heads of the men's societies, under the chairmanship of the head chiefs.

SOCIETIES. Each tribe had a series of men's societies in which membership was based on age. Young men purchased membership in the most recently organized society, remained usually four years, and entered the next in the series by purchase, continuing thus until the last was reached. There were from 10 to 14 societies in each of the three tribal divisions. Today many of these organizations are extinct. The societies as a whole were called "All-comrades." The societies kept order at all times, were a permanent military force, had charge of the buffalo hunt and were a means of social recreation for their members. All had dances, rituals and costumes peculiar to themselves. Among the Blackfoot and Blood there was one woman's society. There are also a few loosely organized societies which give social dances. For the religious societies see the next paragraph.

RELIGION. The principal god of the tribe is the Sun, who is often thought of in the guise of Old Man, a being full of many contradictions of character. Everything comes from the Sun, and many prayers, gifts and sacrifices are made to him. Besides the Sun the people revere other minor deities which are personifications of natural forces in the sky, on earth and beneath the waters. Thunder, the Earth and Winter are typical beings of this type. A mysterious force which fills all things in nature is called "power" or "medicine." Animals and some inanimate objects have more power than man and hence are greatly revered. Through dreams man may learn how to obtain some of this power. In a dream some bird or animal will give instructions as to how to make a bundle and the songs and ritual which must accompany it. The person who receives these revelations carries them out and through the possession of the bundle possesses a certain amount of power. Societies also own bundles and rituals. These bundles are usually collections of parts of birds and animals, pipes, sticks, stones, etc., wrapped up in several layers of skin or cloth. Bundles may be transferred from one owner to another by purchase. Many bundles have long histories and have grown greatly in importance with the passing of years. Besides the bundles there are medicine pipes with similar rituals and influence. Shields, war-bonnets and painted tipis are other things which are more or less filled with power and accordingly possess rituals and transfer proceedings. The ceremonies relative to the making, use and transfer of the bundles and other objects mentioned constitute the major religious activities of the Blackfoot, who have developed this system more than any other tribe.

Besides these ceremonies there are many religious dances belonging to the societies, and the Sun Dance or Medicine Lodge of each division. There are both medicine men and women in charge of healing and religious matters. There is a belief in a future life in a rather dreary, unpleasant land. About half of the people are now Christian, mostly Roman Catholic.

DWELLINGS AND VILLAGES. Until recent times, when some wooden houses have been built, the only home of the Blackfoot was the conical tent or tipi, made by stretching a cover of hide or canvas about a frame of poles. The four pole foundation is used. Tipis are usually

quite elaborately painted with designs connected with the medicine or power of the owner. The tipi is extensively used today, especially in the summer. Throughout most of the year, in the old days, the bands, or small groups from within the bands, moved their tipis about according to their needs for food, protection against enemies, etc. In winter the villages were usually in well-protected areas and in the summer out on the open plains. Once a year, in early summer, all the bands in each tribe assembled for tribal councils and the Sun Dance. The tipis were set up in an immense circle in which the tents of each band had a regular place and order. Often the tipis of the chiefs and band leaders made up an inner circle. Villages could be dismantled and put on the march very easily and quickly. The women, who had entire charge of making and setting up the tipis, took off the covers and loaded them and their other possessions on dog or horse travois (see under Transportation). For details of tipi construction and furnishings see leaflet 19.

FOOD. The meat of buffalo, elk, deer and antelope formed the largest part of the diet, though most other animals except the bear were eaten. Though the tribes surrounding them ate the dog the Blackfoot did not. Fish and waterfowl were formerly not used, but this is no longer true. Meat was eaten fresh after roasting or boiling, smoked and dried for future use, or made into pemmican, a pounded mixture of meat, fat and often wild fruits. No food crops were cultivated, all vegetable food being wild. The service or sarvis berry, (*Amelanchier oblongifolia*) was the most important vegetable food. Wild cherries, (*Prunus demissa*), buffalo berry, (*Eleagnus argentea*), bull berry, (*Shepherdia argentea*), dog-feet, (*Disporum trachycarpum*), and red willow berries were other extensively used fruits. All were both eaten fresh or dried for storage. Stalks of the cow parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*) were roasted. The roots and bulbs of the wild potato (*Claytonia lanceolata*), wild onion (*Allium recurvatum*), smart weed (*Polygonum bistortoides*), milk vetch (*Astragalus carolinianus*), bitter root (*Lewisia rediviva*), wild turnip (*Lithospermum linearifolium*), evening primrose (*Musenium divaricatum*) and camas (*Camassia esculenta*) were roasted or boiled or dried. Wild mint (*Mentha canadensis*), was used for flavoring.

COOKING was done by roasting or boiling. Vegetable foods were roasted in the ashes or in pits over hot stones. Roots were pulverized and used to thicken soup. Meat was preferably boiled, though broiling was done. In historic times boiling has been done in metal kettles procured from white traders. It is possible that long ago some pottery was made. In an emergency food was boiled with hot stones in a buffalo paunch or even a green hide. Bowls and spoons were made of wood, horn and bone. Metal knives and axes replaced those of stone.

FIRE was formerly kindled by rubbing pieces of wood. This method was supplanted by the flint and steel which came with the whites. When traveling, bits of smoldering punk were carried in a closed horn. Fires were built in the tipis and also outside in good weather. Fallen trees and branches made the fuel.

CLOTHING. Men wore skin shirts, leggings, breech-cloth, moccasins and robe. The shirts were made of two deer or antelope skins. There were sleeves, but the sides were not sewn, being only tied together in one or two places. They were decorated with quilled or beaded bands,

fringes and white weasel skins, those for full dress having the most trimmings. The hip-length leggings were tied to a belt and often painted yellow with black horizontal stripes. They were cut tight around the ankle and instep. Robes were made of buffalo hide, decorated with painted designs. Those for winter had the hair left on. Fur caps made from whole skins were worn in winter. The feathered war-bonnet seems to have been used in early times much less than by most plains tribes. More recent pictures show it in more general use. The type having the head feathers standing straight up seems to have been preferred to that with drooping plumes. Skin hoods with horns attached were often used. While eagle feathers were used in many ways, they do not seem to have been as much favored as white weasel skins. The young men were especially inclined to dandyism, spending most of their spare time in arraying themselves in elaborate garments. The tribe as a whole was famed for its fine clothes.

Women wore long dresses of two elk or deer skins, trimmed, especially on the yoke, with beads, quills and fringes. The knee-length leggings, now made of cloth, are trimmed with beads on the cuff and on the seam. The leggings are pulled down over the uppers of the moccasins. Headgear was seldom worn. Moccasins for both sexes had hard rawhide soles and beaded or quilled soft uppers. Children wore replicas of their parents dress.

There were endless special costumes for ceremonial use and ornaments of many kinds for ordinary use. Both sexes painted the face, but the body very little.

Cloth made by the whites has largely supplanted the old clothing. But the moccasin has held its own to a great extent.

HUNTING AND TRAPPING. The Blackfoot country was full of game of many kinds and in vast numbers. While all animals were pursued and eaten by the Indians, the buffalo was the main object of the hunt. Individual hunting was forbidden, the process being a community affair under the direction of the men's societies. The chief method of catching the buffalo was by impounding. On an expanse of prairie ending in a low cliff piles of brush or stones were built in a crude V, its slightly open apex at the edge of the cliff. At the foot of the cliff a large corral of poles and brush was built. A herd of buffalo was worked into the V and then driven over the cliff and into the corral, where the animals were killed. In later times herds were surrounded and shot down by mounted men. Before good repeating rifles were available only enough animals were killed to fill the needs of the tribe. But towards the end of the buffalo period many were shot just for the fun of it. Antelope were also driven into a V, but an open pit replaced the cliff and corral. Deer and small game were caught in loop snares, or killed after careful stalking by individual hunters. Log deadfalls were built for coyotes, foxes and wolves. Fish were caught with weirs and basket traps. As eagles were too difficult to hit with arrows or bullets they were caught by hand. Pits were dug in which men crouched under brush covers. Bait placed on the brush attracted the eagles, which were caught by the legs when they alighted.

WAR AND WEAPONS. The Blackfoot were celebrated fighters, war apparently being their chief occupation, at least after the coming of the horse. The Sarcee, their nearest neighbors, were unmolested and

with the Gros Ventre they were usually at peace. But all the other tribes around them were considered enemies. The tribe was never officially at war with the United States or the Canadian government, but the whites were always received with hostility, except, of course, in individual cases. Horse stealing was the principal cause of warlike raids. Parties were sometimes away two years or more. Expeditions for revenge or in pursuit of coups and scalps were also common. Coups were feats of daring in war, the touching of an enemy being the greatest. Scalping was less important. Until firearms were obtained bows and arrows, lances, stone-headed clubs and knives were the weapons used. Fortifications were only built in great emergencies, charges on horseback being the favorite way of fighting.

TRANSPORTATION. Before horses were obtained in the early 18th century all travel was on foot. Burdens were carried on dogs with the aid of the travois. This is a V-shaped frame of poles, the apex resting on the animal's back and the ends dragging on the ground. Rods or netting are fastened across the poles behind the animal. The same frame, greatly enlarged, has been used since the coming of the horse. The tipi cover is the heaviest article to be carried. In it are wrapped all the possessions of a family. There were no canoes, crude rafts being built when a water crossing was necessary. Saddles were made of wood or horn. The frame was covered with green hide which shrunk in drying, thus drawing the pieces tightly together. Men's saddles were little more than pads, while those for women had high pommels and cantles. Stirrups were of hide. Hair or hide ropes served for bridles. Babies are carried on skin-covered cradle boards with high rounded tops decorated with beads, quills and fringes. The babies are placed in a fur-lined pocket of skin attached to the board. Sleds were not used, though the boys slid down hill on buffalo ribs. Snowshoes were only found in the extreme north of the range.

SKIN DRESSING. The skins of many animals were treated with the rawhide or soft dressing methods described in leaflet 2. Scraping and thinning with bone or metal tools, drying, rubbing with brains, washing, softening by pulling, and smoking were the methods employed. A woman's worth as a wife and her position in the tribe were to a considerable extent determined by her skill in this field of endeavor. Though skin clothing has largely disappeared, the continued use of moccasins and rawhide bags has kept the art alive. Soft dressed skins were made into clothing, long pipe bags, shorter paint and toilet pouches, saddle bags, cruppers, awl cases, knife sheaths and various other small objects. The pipe bags have a narrow beaded field at the bottom, long, bottom fringes without quilling, and bead edging around the mouth, which is cut into four ear-like flaps. Awl cases usually have blue beads and no closing flaps. Rawhide was made into shields, moccasin soles, large flat envelopes, cylindrical cases for ceremonial objects, and parfleches, or large folding cases with side and end flaps fastened with laces. Black-foot parfleches have angling flaps, three pairs of lace holes and side loops, the latter feature being peculiar to the tribe. The envelopes, cases and parfleches are decorated with painted geometrical designs. Curving lines on parfleches are a Blackfoot characteristic.

QUILL EMBROIDERY was formerly carried on very extensively and skillfully, but is now almost extinct, the introduction of beads being largely responsible. The quills were taken from the porcupine, or some times from bird feathers. The porcupine quills were dyed with vegetable dyes, an art which has long vanished. It is known that the yellow came from the moss *Evernia vulpina*. For many years the colors have been obtained by boiling the quills in a kettle along with cloth dyed the desired color. The dyed quills were flattened and applied to the skin or cloth in a great variety of ways. Eighteen methods have been discovered and analyzed. They are discussed and pictured in reference 1, pages 55-63. Leaflet 103 discusses Indian quillwork more fully.

BEADWORK on skin or cloth has been extensively carried on since manufactured beads became available. The beads are fastened in place with sinew with the "spot" stitch, which gives a uniform surface lacking the ridges made by the "lazy" stitch. See leaflet 2 for information on these sewing technics. Stepped and checkered triangles, diagonal checker rows and horizontal stripes and combinations of all three are the most typical designs of Blackfoot beadwork. Moccasins are likely to have a solid U-shaped design on the instep. Yellow, blue and light red are more common in backgrounds than white. Flower designs and woven work are recent innovations which have drifted in from the north central Algonkin tribes, such as the Ojibwa—see leaflet 36. Beadwork was and still is applied to everything made of skin or cloth. The small beads used in this work are all of white manufacture. Beading is entirely the work of women. See leaflets 73-74, 117 and 118-119 for more facts.

MUSIC. Like all Indian tribes the Blackfoot sing a great deal. Every action in their complicated rituals is accompanied by one or more songs, and as some sort of ceremonial practise goes with almost all undertakings, both large and small, the total number of songs is very large. Both men and women sing. Songs are accompanied with drums and rattles. The one-headed hand drum is the most common instrument. It has a skin head stretched on a wooden band with cross strings behind for a handle. For large dances drums were once made from hollow logs. Now washtubs, barrels, etc., are used. Skin rattles filled with pebbles, and eagle wing bone whistles were used also. Flutes are made to a very limited extent.

GAMES. Practical jokes are popular. Children played games like those of white children, such as tops, hide-and-see, and tag. Shinny, a game in which arrows are thrown at a netted wheel, a ball game involving kicking, wrestling, a game of opposing sides kicking each other, and swimming were amusements of the young people on which there was in general no gambling. Betting for high stakes accompanied dice games and those in which the guessing of a hidden object was involved. The latter was played by teams and a score was kept with wood counters. Continuous singing was kept up.

TOBACCO AND SMOKING. Tobacco, (*Nicotiana attenuata*), was cultivated. The dried leaves of kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva ursi*) and princess pine (*Chimaphila umbellata*) were used to supplement the supply of tobacco. Both men and women smoked. The pipes are of dark green to black stone. Any red pipestone pipes which were used

came from the Sioux country to the southeast. The stems are of smooth wood, rounded and pierced with hot wire. Women's pipes are smaller than men's. The sticks for tamping or stoking are short. Smoking is an important part of ceremonial proceedings, but is also done for enjoyment.

CUSTOMS. Children are born in isolated tipis. Births are followed by feasting. Children are carefully brought up, being disciplined and taught good manners as well as how to work. Marriages are either arranged by parents or follow a courtship. Gifts were given as a purchase price. Polygamy was practised extensively. The couple live with the man's band. Divorce is easy, the only requirement being that the purchase price must be returned. Marriage is usually out of the band, but not necessarily so. Labor was evenly divided, the man providing the food and protection and the woman caring for the home and children. Hospitality was stressed, and generosity to the poor and unfortunate. The sick were treated by the medicine men, in whose art were combined a considerable knowledge of herb healing and care of wounds with many magical beliefs and practises. The dead were formerly placed in trees or isolated tipis but are now buried. If death comes in a tipi it is abandoned for fear of ghosts. Mourning is principally done by the women and is attended by cutting the hair and skin and sometimes by the removal of part of a finger. There is no definite length to the mourning period. The sweat lodge was extensively used in ceremonies and in daily life. A daily cold bath was customary the year around.

Compiled from the following sources by F. H. Douglas:

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