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Early Blackfoot History

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EARLY BLACKFOOT HISTORY.

BY GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL.

For nearly one hundred years the Blackfeet have inhabited the country lying between the Saskatchewan on the north and the Yellowstone on the south, from the Rocky mountains on the west as far east as a north-and-south line drawn through the point where the Yellowstone river empties into the Missouri. This was their country, and although it was often invaded by neighboring tribes, yet the Blackfeet, with their allies, the Gros Ventres of the Prairie and the Sarcees, held it and made unrelenting war on all intruders.

Three tribes, known to the whites as Blackfeet, Bloods, and Piegans, made up the confederated group of Indians termed the Blackfoot Nation. These three tribes, having the same habits, speaking one language, and freely intermarrying, really constituted a single people. They had common interests; what was the quarrel of one of the tribes was the quarrel of all three. They were allies in war; they hunted and camped together. Members of one tribe often lived for years with one of the others, and their children grew up as members of it; so that the divisions between the tribes were not well marked.

Why the confederation should have taken the name of the Blackfeet is not certainly known. It may be that the tribe of that name was the earliest to be encountered by the Hudson Bay Company's employés—the first whites to penetrate their country—and that having become known to these whites as Blackfeet, this name was afterward extended to include all tribes which spoke the same language. What appears much more probable is that originally there was but one tribe of these people, the Blackfeet (Siks-i-ka'ho), and that the Bloods and Piegans are offshoots of this main tribe, which branched off from it not very long ago, though nothing is now known as to the time, place, or circumstances of such separation. Among themselves, at the present day, the term Blackfeet refers only to that section of the nation which bears this name.

These people have various traditions as to their origin, but most

of these are quite unsatisfactory and give us little or no information. It is said that Old Man married a female dog, and that the progeny of this union were real boys and girls, the first Blackfeet. Among the Old Man stories which I have collected is one entitled "Origin of People," which, while dealing with the creation of humanity at large, speaks particularly of the Blackfeet and their present neighbors, and like other similar tales carries the implication that this creation took place in the country which their nation now inhabits; but all allusions to geographical features, such as prominent landmarks, the mountain ranges or rivers of the region now occupied by the Blackfeet, are comparatively modern additions to these tales and have become a part of them only since this people came to its present home.

A story which seems to belong to the Blackfoot tribe alone asserts that they came from the southwest, and is intended to explain the origin of the three tribes. I give it below just as it was told me by Mr. J. W. Schultz, who received it from Crazy Dog, an old man of that tribe.

"Very long ago there was a tribe of people living far to the south, on the other side of the mountains. Somehow game became very scarce there, and the people began to starve. In this tribe there was an old man who had three sons, all grown and married, and he felt very sad to see them and their little children starving and growing thinner every day. One morning he called his sons to his lodge and said, 'My children, listen. I have mourned a great deal for you lately. I have felt very badly to see you and the little ones starve. For myself, I do not care. I am now very old, and the time is near for me to die. I have been praying a great deal for you lately, trying to find some way for you to survive. Last night my Dream talked to me. Hear what he said and then do as you think best. My opinion is that he spoke well. He said, "*Kyi*, old man, take courage. This is not the only country. Beyond these mountains is a very big land. There you will find plenty of food. Stay here no longer. Before you get any weaker, cross these mountains with your children. Thus shall you survive.'"

"For some time no one spoke. All were thinking of the Dream's words. At last one of the sons said, 'Maybe this is the truth. I am willing to go. If we stay here we will surely die. If we cross the mountains we may find the game. If we do not find it, we can die there as well as here.'

“‘True! true!’ said the other sons, ‘we can try. Let us hurry and get ready.’

“It did not take them long to start, for they left all their property behind, except a few robes. There was no trail, and the mountains were steep, so they travelled very slowly. They could not go fast, for the women had to carry the smallest children, and all were weak from hunger. Sometimes the men killed a bird or a rabbit, and some days they found some roots or berries to eat. Other days they had nothing, and at night they went to bed hungry and the children cried themselves to sleep. When they first started they thought that when they had climbed the mountains in sight and reached the top they would be able to see the new country on the other side; but beyond these mountains were many others, and they kept climbing up and down, up and down, until they thought there were nothing but mountains beyond. So one day they talked of giving up, they were so weak, when they suddenly saw that they had passed the last peak. Beyond was the great prairie, reaching to the end of the world. By sunset they reached it, and camped beside a little stream. Already they had seen plenty of game, great bands of buffalo, elk, and antelope. Early in the morning the sons started out to hunt, but they had bad luck. They could not get near enough to game to kill it. But their father was a powerful person. He made a black medicine, a very wonderful medicine, and rubbed it on his oldest son’s feet, and it enabled him to run so fast that he got right up beside a fat cow and killed her with one arrow.

“Then they feasted, first giving the tongue to the Sun, and once more they felt well and easy, and the children again ran about and played as they had in other days before starvation came. The old man gave his eldest son a new name. ‘Hereafter,’ he said, ‘your name is Siks-i-ka’ho [Blackfoot]. It shall be the name of your children, too.’

“Now the other sons were jealous. They said, ‘Is our elder brother better than we? Why may we not have some of this black medicine, too?’

“‘Wait,’ said their father. ‘You shall each have a new name. First go to war, and when you return I will give you new names for yourselves and your children. Here we will found three tribes, and this shall be their country.’ The young men soon got ready and started, one going south, the other east.

“It was winter when the one who went east returned. He brought

scalps with him, and also some weapons which he had taken from the enemy. His father named him Kai'-nah [Bloods]. From him and his children this tribe started.

"The other son did not return until the middle of the winter. He also brought scalps and weapons, and some wearing apparel of curious make; so the old man named him Pi-kū'n-i [Piegan]. He was the first of this tribe."

Mr. Schultz says: "I heard this story nearly ten years ago. It was then, as now, known only to the Blackfoot tribe, and is therefore probably of recent origin. Since then I have heard it related several times by the Blackfeet, and find that it has been embellished by extracts from missionary teachings, for they now say that when the old man and his children were making this journey they came to a great salt lake, and the old man 'made medicine;' whereupon the waters parted and they crossed on dry land."

This is the only legend that I know of which professes to account for the origin of the three tribes. There appears to be no reason for believing that there is any foundation for the story. It has, so far as we know, nothing to support it, while, as I shall endeavor to show, there is evidence which indicates that the migration of the Blackfeet was from quite the opposite direction.

It is commonly stated that the Blackfeet (Siks-i-ka'ho) were so named because their feet or moccasins were always discolored by the black soil of the country where they lived or from the black surface of prairies recently burned over; but this is a mere guess, and the origin of the name can probably never be determined. The Blackfoot name for the Blood tribe is Kai'-nah. The term Blood was probably given them by the Hudson Bay people on account of their custom of painting their faces with a red streak extending from ear to ear.

No Indian in these days professes to know the signification of the word Kai'-nah. I believe that originally the word was Ah'-kai-nah, "many chiefs" (from *a-kai-in'*, "many," and *ni'-nah*, "chief"), and that in the course of time it has been abbreviated to its present form, Kai'-nah, and has lost its meaning. There are many words in this, as in other Indian languages, which have undergone changes like this. Such a name might well enough have been applied in derision to a portion of a tribe which left the main body in anger, and it might have been said of them, "Well, let them go; there are many chiefs among them."

The meaning of the tribal name Pi-kūn'-i, which the whites have altered to Piegan, has also been lost. By some it is said to mean simply "wearing apparel," but a more probable definition is from *ap'-i-kūn-i*, referring to a badly tanned robe, one with white, hard spots in it. This would be from *d'pi*, "white;" *ih'-kan*, "a hard buffalo hide," and perhaps *i*, from *tūppi*, "people." If the derivation of Kai'-nah, above suggested, is the true one, it would seem that the word *ap'-i-kūn-i* might have undergone a like abbreviation and become the present name of that tribe.

The studies of ethnologists have determined this people to be of Algonquian stock, and the more fully their language, religion, and customs are studied the more strongly is this conclusion confirmed. More than thirty years ago the Roman Catholic missionaries invented a peculiar but very simple alphabet—an alphabet of arbitrary signs to express syllabic sounds, not one of letters—with which to write the Knisteneaux and allied languages. This alphabet is so readily understood that a great majority of the Crees are able to read it. Later it was discovered that this same alphabet answered all the requirements of the Blackfoot language; that it served to express the sounds of this tongue, just as it did those of the Cree. This is good evidence that the Blackfeet are Algonquian. A long time has elapsed since the Crees and the Blackfeet spoke the same tongue, for the two languages have so changed that now one tribe cannot understand the other. The elementary sounds in both are still alike, but, except in a few instances, Blackfoot words now differ widely from the same words in Cree. The Cree has quite an extensive printed literature, most of which, being the work of missionaries, has to do with religion, while but little has been written of the Blackfoot.

As in language, so now in religion and in customs, the Blackfeet differ measurably from other tribes of the parent stock. There are, nevertheless, as will elsewhere be shown, many points which are common to the Blackfeet and Crees.

Since the whites first came to know much about the Blackfeet they have inhabited and been masters of the plains of the northwest from the Missouri river to the Saskatchewan, and it appears to have been taken for granted that they have always occupied this same country, or at least that they took possession of it in very ancient times. So learned an authority as Dr. D. G. Brinton, in writing of the period from 1500 to 1600 A. D., says of this people: "The

Blackfeet carried a remote dialect of their [the Algonquian] tongue quite to the Rocky mountains, while the fertile prairies of Illinois and Indiana were the homes of the Miamis." At the present day it is believed by the younger generation of Bloods, Blackfeet, and Piegans that the tribes were created in the land which they now inhabit, but there are still many of the older men, those who are most thoughtful and whose minds are stored with the history of the past, who are aware of ancient traditions which point to another distant original home for the Blackfeet people. There are alive to-day many men who know that in the time of their grandfathers all the tribes of the Blackfoot nation lived north of the Red Deer's river and rarely ventured south of it into the country then occupied by the Snakes, the Crows, and some branches of the Dakotas.

The memory of this northern home and of the migration from it is rapidly dying out among the people, but I shall endeavor to show that not very long ago, probably within 200 years, the Blackfeet were not a plains people; that at that time they had never seen the Rocky mountains, but lived far to the northeast of their present home, probably near or north of Lesser Slave lake, and were then a timber-inhabiting people, as most tribes of Algonquian stock have ever been. To demonstrate this unexpected fact will be difficult, if not impossible, but I can at least give the grounds on which I base my conclusions, and the evidence, so far as it goes, shows that the Blackfeet started from this northern and eastern home, working their way slowly westward and southward; that when they reached the mountains they became a mountain people, still living in the timber, and continued this mode of life until they began to obtain horses, less than 100 years ago. With the introduction of this animal an entire change took place in their ways of life, and from being a race of mountain-dwellers they became rovers of the plains and chasers of the buffalo.

The first hint which directed my attention toward this migration came to me from the Blackfoot terms for the cardinal points. Inquiries extended over two or three seasons established the existence of a tradition of the northern origin and a migration from the ancient home, history which is to-day unknown among the younger people. The knowledge that the Crees call the Blackfeet A-wah-kan', "slaves," and their women "little slaves," suggested the Slave Indians of the north, said to dwell near the Slave lakes. Then I succeeded in finding a number of old persons who knew more or less

of this tradition, and finally I discovered a man who in his youth had known well an old man whose father had told him of a time, when he was young, when the Blackfeet first saw the Rocky mountains.

While much of the evidence which I present may appear to come from a single source, a large part of it has been corroborated by accounts given me by other men, interrogated at different times and places and through different interpreters. There are many men who know that long ago this people all lived north of the Red Deer river, and who thus are aware of the later southern migration. Those who go farthest back claim that the original home of the tribe was much farther north, and that they lived in the country north of Lesser Slave lake and next south of the Beaver Indians.

When we come to consider the question of a migration of this tribe the Blackfoot names for the cardinal points are very suggestive. Thus, in Blackfeet, North is *Ah-pūt'-ō-sōhts*, back or behind direction; South is *Am'-skāp-ōhts*, ahead or before direction; East is *Pi-nāhp-ōhts*, down direction, while West is *Al'-mī-tōhts*, up direction. The last two names evidently refer to the course of the streams in the Blackfoot land, all of which flow from west to east. Other Indian languages offer analogous examples of the origin of the terms "east" and "west." These names for north and south afford very strong evidence in support of the tradition of a southward migration, and in themselves go far toward justifying a belief that the Blackfeet came from the north, for what could be more natural than that a migrating people should speak of the direction from which they had come as back or behind, and of that in which they were going as ahead or forward.

I present here accounts given me by John Monroe, an intelligent half-breed, as he got them from his mother and from an old Blood Indian named Sū'-tā-nē. John Monroe is now about 65 years of age. He had two brothers older than himself. His mother was a grown woman, perhaps 18 or 20 years old, when she married his father, Hugh Monroe. This was in 1816, so that it is probable that she was born during the last decade of the eighteenth century. John Monroe was a boy or very young man when he overheard these conversations between the old Sū'-tā-nē and his mother in her lodge, and Sū'-tā-nē was a very old man; so that the period of which he spoke, which was of his childhood, was very likely at least one hundred years ago, or more.

This old Blood used to say that he had often heard his father

speak of the trouble the people used to have down in the timber country below; how they were at war with their neighbors in that lower country, and of their journey up the river—the Saskatchewan or some of its tributaries,—and that it was in his father's boyhood days that they first saw the Rocky mountains. In telling the story of his father's and his grandfather's time, "when they were in the timber," Sū'-ta-nē used to speak of the difficulties of hunting, and to say that often it was a hard matter to kill the game with their arrows. In Sū'-ta-nē's young days they lived and hunted on waters tributary to the Saskatchewan, in a country generally level or rolling, for the most part timbered, but with stretches of prairie. Here it was often difficult to approach the game. In those days they often saw, far off, the peaks of the Rocky mountains. Little by little they moved on westward, and at last reached the mountains. When they got there they found how much easier it was to approach the wild animals in the rough broken country of the foothills. Game was very abundant and they had no difficulty in killing it, and from that time on they lived in the mountains. That is how they came to change from a timber to a mountain people. Sū'-ta-nē used to speak often, and at great length, of the difference between the hunting of his day and that of his father and grandfather in the timber—how much easier it was to get game than it had been formerly. It was not until they obtained horses that they came to be a plains people. The first time they ventured out on the prairie was when they began to travel along the old trail which still runs north and south along the mountains. Here they had the mountains on one side and the prairie on the other.

John Monroe's mother used to tell him that she could remember a time, when she was a little girl, when the people had no horses. Then dogs were their only beasts of burden. This corresponds very well with the date set by Wolf Calf for the time when horses were first obtained, as stated elsewhere—about 1804-1806.

His mother used to say that in the days of her parents the Blackfeet were not a prairie people, but were mountain and timber dwellers. In the autumn they would move into a thick piece of timber and would remain there all the winter, never moving the camp. The men who, while out hunting, killed game a long way from camp used to strip the meat of the animal from its bones, pack it in the skin, lacing this up with strips of hide, and dragging this bundle home over the snow. Lodge-poles were not transported, because,

being in the timber, they could always obtain them wherever they might pitch their camp. No doubt in those days camp was moved but seldom, and then only a short distance, for as game was so abundant everywhere, it was not necessary to follow it about, and the only reason for moving would be to get away from the accumulated refuse of the camp, and for this a move of a mile or two would suffice.

The three Blackfoot tribes—Blackfeet, Bloods, and Piegans—are known to the Cree people by the name *Aī-ass-tsí'-nō-wūhk*, which means “a different people.” Now, about twenty days' journey northeast of Fort Edmonton and southwest of Lake Athabasca is a large lake, known in all that country as *Aī-ass-tsí'-nō-wūhk Sa-ha'-ki-gun*, which means the different people's lake or Blackfoot lake. This body of water is Lesser Slave lake, and it is known or believed by all the Indians in that country that this lake is named after the Blackfeet. A tradition exists among all the Indians of that region that in their forefathers' days all that country belonged to the Blackfeet.

John Monroe was for many years a trader for the Hudson Bay Company and spent his time traveling backward and forward through that country, associating with the Indians who inhabited it. In his journeyings and in his camps he used frequently to hear stories of old times and discussions as to relationships. He has heard old men among the Crees speak of the Blackfeet as related to them and as if they were once all mixed up together; but as the Blackfeet moved west toward the Rocky mountains, while the Crees remained in the timber, the two lost sight of each other.

The Piegans say that their fathers used to speak of the Crees as *Kéks-ō-quan Assina'wa*, our relations the Crees, or as *Ki-tsihk'-ka-wa-nōn'-iks Assina'wa*, our friends the Crees. *Assina'wa* is a general term applied to all the bands of the Crees, the Assinaboines, Chipeweyans, and other northern tribes. Its etymology I have not been able to determine, but it is manifestly related to the Cree *assini*, a stone. The inferences and conclusions which I have drawn from all this are confirmed in a most interesting way from an entirely independent source. Late in the year 1891 I wrote to Mr. Henry J. Moberly, chief factor of the Hudson Bay Company, who has resided in the northwest since 1854, and who has charge of the Isle a la Crosse district, asking him for information as to the former range of the Blackfeet in the country near Lesser Slave lake. He writes me on this point as follows: “Tradition says that formerly, 200 or

so years ago, the I-ě-chi'-ně-wuk Slave Indians lived at Lesser Slave lake and occupied the country between Peace river and the Saskatchewan and were next neighbors to the Beaver Indians, and that the Chippewayans, coming from the east, had driven in between these two tribes and had driven the Slaves south."

A migration similar to that performed by the Blackfeet took place in the case of the Sarcees, who, it is said, inhabited the same region as the Blackfeet, and who, probably within 100 years, moved south and joined them. These Sarcees, though not related to the Blackfeet, have long been their allies and lived under their protection. They are a small tribe speaking a language of their own, and are of Athapascan or Tinneh stock. They are rapidly disappearing.

The fact of this migration is well known among the Blackfeet and the Sarcees, but the following independent account received from Mr. Moberly is extremely interesting. He says: "Formerly, but not so very long ago, on the junction of the Red river with the Peace river, about 50 miles below Vermillion, two bands of Beaver Indians met after their winter hunts were over. One came from the King river, close to Great Slave lake, and the other from farther west, on the slopes of the Rockies between the Liard and King rivers. As usual, they gambled and quarreled, and some blood was spilt. One chief, the younger one, pitched off south of the Athabasca river and north of Edmonton and joined the I-ass-tsin'-e-wuk, who then lived there. These Indians are now the Sarcee band, and their language can still be understood by a Beaver Indian who lives north of Peace river. This must have occurred about 1780 to 1790."

So far as we know, there are no tribes to the southwest, south, or southeast that are closely related to the Blackfeet. The Cheyennes and the Arapahoes are Algonquian, and I am disposed—perhaps without any very convincing reason—to consider the former more nearly akin to the Blackfeet than has been commonly supposed.

The Blackfeet themselves believe that there is a related tribe living somewhere to the south. An old legend current among the Piegans, and which I first heard several years ago, gives the following account of the parting of the tribe: Once, long ago, at the end of winter, the people were traveling southward, when they came to a large river, which they began to cross on the ice. In those days the people were very many in number, and when they traveled the line of march was a long one. A part of the tribe had crossed the river and some were on the ice, but the greater number were still on the north bank, not yet having reached the stream. A child saw a

pretty buffalo horn frozen in the ice and cried for it. Some one began to knock it loose, and while this was being done the ice suddenly broke up, drowning many of the Indians and separating the tribe into two portions. Neither party could cross the swollen stream, and the Blackfeet on the south bank were never seen again by those who remained on the north side of the stream. It was long supposed that they had all perished, but it is thought now that somewhere off to the south they still exist as a tribe. Once, when the Blackfeet were visiting the Crows, they met there a man, also a visitor like themselves, who spoke a language nearly like their own, so that they could understand him. It is said that war parties returning from the south have more than once reported meeting people who could talk the Blackfoot, but definite information on this point is not obtainable. It would seem more probable that a portion of a tribe so cut off would join some other tribe and be absorbed by it, language and all. This story is sometimes told of the tribe as moving toward the north, and the river located as the Yellowstone, but this last is no doubt a recent addition to it. As told to me, the river referred to was somewhere to the north, and the reference seemed to be to the Saskatchewan. This took place long before the Blackfeet had horses.

It is curious and interesting, if nothing more, to compare with this Blackfoot tradition one which is current among the Cheyennes with regard to the migration of the Sū-ti band of that people, and which I received from my friend, Mr. Ben. Clark, of Fort Reno, Oklahoma, who has lived among the Cheyennes for thirty years. The story is as follows: Some years after the Cheyennes reached the Black Hills country (perhaps 150 or 200 years ago) they were joined by a band of Indians from the far north. These Indians spoke a dialect of the Cheyenne language, but many words were quite different, so that they could hardly be understood. This band is called Sū-ti, which it is claimed means "strange talkers." Originally they comprised about one-sixth of the whole tribe of Cheyennes. Ever since they joined the tribe they have constituted a clan known by this same name, but the descendants of the original tribe do not now number more than a tenth of the whole number of the Cheyennes. The Sū-ti, when they joined the Cheyennes, said that a great many more of their people had started on the migration with them. They had camped one day on an island in a large river (supposed to be the Saskatchewan), which was then frozen over. At night they were aroused by the sound of ice breaking up in the river

above them, and of rushing waters. In a moment all was confusion. Some hurried across the ice to one bank and some to the other, and thus they became separated. On the following morning there was nothing to be seen of those who had gone to the north bank, and as the river was a torrent, full of floating ice, it could not be crossed. The Sū-ti had no horses then, and it was necessary to move to get subsistence for so many traveling in a body. The migration was resumed without their knowing anything as to the fate of those who were left behind.

This story bears a curious resemblance to the Blackfoot tradition, and, while the two may not really have any relation to each other, it is at least one of those coincidences that we so often meet with in studying Indian history.

When the Hudson Bay Company's employés first encountered the Blackfeet they were living along the Saskatchewan and its northern tributaries. Soon after this they began to move south and west, and not very long after to accumulate horses, taken in war from their southern enemies, the Crows, Snakes, Flatheads, and others. Up to this time, early in the present century, the Piegans—the southernmost of the three tribes—had seldom crossed the St. Mary's river to the south of their country, except on war excursions. As soon, however, as they were supplied with guns by the traders, they became bolder, and moved south in a body, driving all hostile tribes before them. By 1816 they had conquered a great territory from the Assinaboines, Crows, Snakes, Flatheads, and other tribes, aided only by the Gros Ventres, who had lately joined them. This great hunting ground extended from the Saskatchewan south to the Yellowstone river, and from the Rocky mountains eastward to about the meridian of 108° west. Sometimes their war parties went much farther south, even as far as the Great Salt lake. On these long journeys they often encountered people who inhabited far distant countries. The Pawnees have told me that long ago they used to fight with the Blackfeet, and the Blackfeet to-day say that their grandfathers used to have battles with the Mähk-wé'-yi tūppi or Wolf people. In those days the northern Crees were on excellent terms with the Blackfeet.

This act of conquest shows the Blackfeet to have been a brave, hardy, and adventurous people. Their plains life had given them boldness and dash and had freed them from that desire to fight behind cover which is felt by a woodland people. They had become a race of raiders and the masters of a vast territory which they held against all enemies.