

# **Blood Tribe/Káínai – Traditional Knowledge, Land, & Resource Use**

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## **Introduction**

The Blood Tribe/Káínai (BT/K) is a part of the Blackfoot Confederacy and is based in Southern Alberta on 557.2 square miles of reserve land bordered by the Old Man River, the St. Mary River, and the Belly River. This reserve of 352,600 acres is the largest in Canada (Dempsey, 1997, 28). The population at present is approximately 12,500 (Blood Tribe, 2018).

The traditional Blackfoot territory “extends from the Rocky Mountains to the West; to the Sand Hills to the East; to the North Saskatchewan River in the North, and the Yellowstone in the South” (Blood Tribe, 2018; Crop Eared Wolf, 2007, 1). The Blackfoot Confederacy consists of three tribes of Niitsítapi: the Bloods, the Peigans (both in Alberta and Montana) and the Blackfoot. Of these tribes of Blackfoot, the Bloods refer to themselves as Káínai, the Tribe of Many Chiefs (Dempsey, 1997, 10; Blackfoot Gallery Committee, 2013, 11). Some of the sources cited in this document use the terms Bloods, Blood Tribe, Káínai, or Káínai First Nation but for the most part, BT/K is used to refer to the Blood Tribe/Káínai. When Blackfoot history and culture is discussed in this report, it is intended to refer to BT/K ancestors or to the Blackfoot Confederacy as a whole, rather than to any other particular First Nation.

## **Blood Tribe/Káínai – Profile**

The Blood Tribe/Káínai traces its history through oral traditions, historical research and the archaeological record. These sources suggest that long before the arrival of Europeans to the Americas, the Bloods and their Blackfoot forebears were among the longest established Indigenous groups that still live in Southern Alberta. Wilton Goodstriker writes: “One must keep in mind the history of a people when attempting to understand their perspective, their spirit and intent, in their dealings with newcomers” (Goodstriker, 1996, 5). Following Goodstriker’s lead, this section provides a brief overview of some aspects of BT/K history, land use and geographic occupancy patterns.

According to Trevor Peck, archaeological findings associated with the Blackfoot come from what archaeologists refer to as the Old Women’s phase of archaeological time - about 850 AD to the 1700 AD (Peck, 2011, 3). It is possible that ancestors of the Blackfoot were on the plains prior to that period, but the existing archaeological record that is most distinctively associated with the Blackfoot can be traced at least that far back. Artifacts tied to the Blackfoot from this period include heterogeneous forms of pottery, projectiles, and other artifacts indicative of mobile hunting bands in what are now Southern Alberta, western Saskatchewan and Northern Montana (Peck, 2011, 10; 3). Features tied to the Blackfoot include stone effigies, Iniskim – Buffalo Rocks, arrowheads, pottery, and Medicine Wheels.

During the 1600s, at a time when the Hudson's Bay Company was advancing into the interior of North America in alliance with Crees and Assiniboines, the Blackfoot tribes had their first encounter with Europeans (Goodstriker, 1996, 5). On his journey from the Hudson Bay to the Great Plains south of the Saskatchewan River in 1691 and 1692, Henry Kelsey likely encountered the Blackfoot in their own country (Napier Bell, 1928).

In the late 1600s and early 1700s, the Blackfoot obtained horses descended from those the Spaniards had used in the conquest of Mexico (circa 1520s). According to Blood Tribe/Káínai – Goodstriker, “The horse was acquired from the Kootenay/Salish, the Cheyenne, and the Shoshone tribes, who previously had acquired these from the southern tribes who traded with the Spanish traders. During this era, the need for guns and horses dramatically expanded the trade among First Nations” (Goodstriker, 1996, 5).

Documentary evidence from Hudson's Bay Post Journals at York Factory, written by Chief Factor James Knight in 1717, suggests that the Blood and Blackfoot were in control of the territory between the North Saskatchewan River and the Bow River east of the Rocky Mountains (Knight 1717, PAC HBC B239/a/3, p.34 in Ray, 1998 (1974), 21).

HBC Post records from York Factory from the mid-eighteenth century, circa 1728 to 1741, written by Andrew Graham report the occasional appearance of Bloods at York Factory to trade, though he noted that the Blood lived 800 miles southwest of York Factory and used horses (in Ray, 19998 (1974), 71). The oral history, the archaeological record and the archival sources all concur that by the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the Blackfoot had acquired horses (Peck, 2011, 433).

When Anthony Henday encountered Blackfoot tribes on the plains in 1754 they were skilled horsemen and had guns, kettles and knives (Dempsey, 1997, 12). According to Hugh Dempsey, “at the time of the arrival of the earliest British traders, the Blackfoot confederacy controlled a vast area bounded on the west by the Rocky Mountains, on the north by the North Saskatchewan River, on the south by the Missouri River, and on the east by the present Alberta-Saskatchewan boundary” (Dempsey, 1997, 14). A map drawn by one Donald McKay in 1791 indicated that the territory of the Blood in the Bow River basin and “at the foot of the Rocky Mountains” (Colpitts, 2015, 22).

Archaeological evidence discussed by Peck suggests that the adoption of the horse by Blackfoot hunting bands required a more intensive use of river valleys and coulees as camps and animal husbandry areas due to the water and grass requirements of horses (Peck, 2011, 433). This ‘equestrian shift’ in landscape use meant that “sheltered valleys near rivers” (bid, 434) became more important as sites of occupancy in the last 250 years.

The eighteenth century, in part due to the use of horses, saw long distance trading routes established on the plains: “The 1700s saw a further expansion of trade among the Plains tribes, and with the use of the horse, trading now was occurring over great distances. This era saw the establishment of formal trade centres among the First Nations people, with many of the tribes hosting trade and acting as middlemen/agents for the trade” (Goodstiker, 1996, 6). One of the trading centres was on the site of the present-day town of Banff (ibid). Other Indigenous trading centres would become sites of trading posts involving both Indigenous peoples and newcomers.

Outsiders appeared to have had trouble establishing a foothold within Blackfoot country, even though Blackfoot peoples participated in trade with other Indigenous people and with Europeans. La Vérendrye (Pierre Gaultier de Varennes) who led French efforts to establish trade ties with the Plains people, and in alliance with the Cree and Assiniboines, established a series of posts that stretched deep into the Saskatchewan River system including “a temporary fort ... up the Saskatchewan within sight of the Rocky Mountains (Fort La Jonquiere), possibly near Calgary, in 1751” (Innis, 1999(1930), 95). Another place where Indigenous trading routes and sites were later chosen by newcomers for forts was at Old Fort Creek, which was once the site of the Bow River Fort (Voorhis, 1930). Neither of these forts lasted. “For many years, the Blackfoot resisted the establishment of forts in the heart of their territory” (Crop Eared Wolf, 2007, 2). Instead the Blackfoot appeared to have favoured the use of their traditional trade routes and trade sites such as the one at Banff or near the junction of the Elbow and Bow Rivers.

Within the traditional territory of the Plains people, trading routes and trading places were marked or otherwise identified. As Goodstriker puts it: “Trade centres were marked on the land by stones and on nearby rocks and cliffs. These would indicate who were to use these sites and on whose territory they were situated. Some of these markings were in later years mistaken for medicine wheels. Many of these trade centres in later years were to become the sites of new trading posts and forts” (Goodstriker, 1996, 7).

Traditionally the Blackfoot people and the Blood Tribe in particular, travelled large distances in their subsistence, commercial and spiritual pursuits, much of it based on the bison hunt. According to George Colpitts, “The Blackfoot, one of the plains tribes attaining a veritable socioeconomic synergy with this herd animal, followed a calendar timed according to this movable feast’s comings and goings” (Colpitts, 2015, 63). Summers were spent on long mobile bison hunts while winters were spent in sheltered coulees near rivers close to Bison wintering grounds and in easy reach of water, wood, shelter and grass for horse feed.

The expansion of trade with Europeans would lead to profound changes to Blackfoot society. As Annabel Crop Eared Wolf explains, while the Blackfoot resisted the establishment of forts within their territory and instead traded with Europeans on the periphery of their territory, they nevertheless became both more dependent on trade and suffered smallpox epidemics such as the one in 1780-81 (Crop Eared Wolf, 2007, 2)

The bison hunt proved to be more viable for the Blackfoot in the northern climes of what is now Alberta after about 1810. “The greater winter seasonality in these northern latitudes made bison more predictable in their fall and winter movements, allowing for abundant returns on hunting” (Colpitts, 2015, 14). While the bison were an essential component of traditional Blackfoot subsistence and material culture, providing food, hides for clothing and lodges, tools, fats/oils and even fuel from bison dung, other groups took an interest in bison for their commercial value. The increased demand for pemmican from fur traders in the northern river systems meant an influx of non-Blackfoot hunting bands into Blackfoot territory in the mid-nineteenth century (ibid).

The influx of outsiders was a cause for concern and required peace-making and alliance formation. Wilton Goodstriker explains: “In 1810 there was a meeting between the Bloods and the Sioux in the Cypress Hills to establish peace between the two nations. At that time, the reason for a peace was so that they might share hunting territories. It was decided that the Cypress Hills would be the boundary point, with the Sioux to the east and the Bloods to the West” (Goodstriker, 1996, 7).

Within the Blackfoot territory, according to sources cited by Hugh Dempsey, “a fur trader in 1815 said that the Peigans controlled all the hunting grounds within a hundred miles of the mountains; the Bloods were between the Red Deer and the Bow Rivers; the Blackfoot were north of them” (Dempsey, 1997, 14). Meanwhile, smallpox epidemics in 1837-38 and in 1869-70 devastated the Blackfoot people. “It is estimated that these epidemics killed a quarter to two thirds of the population. By the 1870s, the bison herds were greatly reduced as a result of European demand for buffalo hides, the United States government policy of extermination and Canada’s tacit acceptance of this policy. The demise of the buffalo effectively destroyed the traditional economy and compromised Káínai political autonomy” (Crop Eared Wolf, 2007, 3).

In the face of these forces— decline of the bison, hunger, epidemics of new diseases, and the arrival of newcomers – peacemaking and new alliances were necessary. The Blackfoot and Cree Nations made a peace agreement after a battle near the present-day site of Lethbridge in 1871 after which Blackfoot Chief Crowfoot adopted the Cree Poundmaker as a gesture of peace in the Sand Hills (Goodstriker, 1996, 9). It was not long after the peace alliance that the Northwest Mounted Police arrived in Blackfoot territory near present-day Fort McLeod in 1874. “They were granted permission for one winter, and it’s been a long winter” (Goodstriker, 1996, 9).

The crux of the problem was the role of the NWMP in the facilitation of non-Indigenous settlement and the decline of the bison herds. “The year 1875 saw a major meeting between the Bloods, Blackfoot, Peigan, Sarcee, and Mounted Police. The leaders petitioned Macleod with their concerns; they felt that the police were facilitating White and half-breed settlement of their lands. Macleod had earlier promised the leaders that he was not there to take away their lands. He had also promised to protect the buffalo from White slaughter and had said that he was not in favour of a treaty. The following year he was to change his mind” (Goodstriker, 1996, 9).

The rise and fall of the so-called 'Pemmican Empire' from about 1782 until its collapse in 1879 had implications for the traditional way of life of the Blackfoot:

*The Canadian West, where the British market held its influence, was no more 'mild' than the US West was 'wild.' As an emergent pioneer society, however, it was clearly stamped by the nature and asymmetries of power in food exchange and the different history of aboriginal-white contact unfolding there. When herds collapsed in Canadian territory in 1879 and the last Blackfoot, Cree, and Métis hunts took place in 1882 in Montana, colonialism in Canadian territories had been significantly imprinted by the relationships, market trading, and power dynamics of the pemmican era. But, whatever those legacies, few colonists and Native people were able to fully anticipate the material, subsistence, and social impoverishment that would accompany the end of the buffalo era (Colpitts, 2015, 18).*

The decline of the bison on the Great Plains and the onset of Euro-Canadian settler colonialism would result in more profound changes to the Blood Tribe way of life.

Chief Red Crow entered into Treaty No. 7 in 1877 on behalf of the Blood Tribe along with twenty minor chiefs of the Blood Tribe, joining Chief Crowfoot who entered Treaty on behalf of the Blackfoot Tribe (Dempsey, 1997, 26). While the motivations behind the various parties to the Treaty are still up for debate, Treaty 7 was a watershed moment and indicates that the shift from the Blackfoot's traditional plains culture and way of life was at hand. For the Blackfoot, however, there are many indications that the Treaty was viewed as another means to make peace and alliances to share their traditional territory with newcomers rather than a surrender of their lands or their use of the land (Treaty 7 Elders, 1996).

Contemporary observer Peter Erasmus, present at the end of the bison empire on the Plains, recalled the role of the Blackfoot in the geo-political landscape of the west: "there is no doubt that had it not been for the ferocity of the Blackfoot, Peigan, and Blood tribes against any encroachment in their territory, the American occupation of the southern parts of the territory would have been accomplished long before our own claims could have been established" (Erasmus, 1976, 72). The consequences of the close of the bison hunt, Treaty 7 and the confinement of the Blood Tribe to reserves were soon experienced.

Though the Blood Tribe were successful as farmers in the 1880s, epidemics of tuberculosis, measles and whooping cough took a toll on the Blood Tribe from the 1880s to the 1920s (Dempsey, 1997, 30). According to Crop Eared Wolf, "efforts to develop an alternative economy between 1880 and 1920 were stifled by colonial government policy and practice and by competing third party interests such as the failure of the Department of Indian Affairs to provide cattle to the Tribe, as provided for in the terms of Treaty 7 despite numerous requested and alleged improprieties regarding the leasing of Blood Tribe lands" (Crop Eared Wolf, 2007, 4). By developing opportunities in the local economy through farming, ranching, mining, forestry, services, business, health, construction, education and the arts, the Blood Tribe

established a strong economic foundation over course of the twentieth century (Dempsey, 1997, 33).

More recently, Crop Eared Wolf described the economy and governance of the Blood Tribe: “The economy is agriculture-based, with wheat being the main crop. Other sources of economic revenue and employment include cattle ranching, oil and gas, small business, as well as the Blood Tribe Administration and corporate entities” (Crop Eared Wolf, 2007, 5). As a self-governing Nation, the BT/K remains within Treaty 7 and abides by the Indian Act. “The Blood Tribe is governed by the Indian Act, 1985 and by its own internal legislation drawing on Káínayssini as a source of authority. It relates with the Canadian government through the Treaty of 1877. Káínai leadership is elected pursuant to a custom election code, the Káínaiwa/Blood Tribe Election Bylaw and Regulations, 1995” (Crop Eared Wolf, 2007, 5). In addition to the governing institutions and regulations, “Various boards and corporate entities deliver social and economic programs including agriculture, oil and gas, health, education and child protection services” (Crop Eared Wolf, 2007, 5). The BT/K remains a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy.

The Blackfoot Gallery Committee sums up the history of the Blackfoot Confederacy:

*Our story is also about our struggle to maintain our values, principles and beliefs in the face of relentless change. For centuries we were a strong, independent people. Then whisky and disease began to destroy us. The buffalo, the mainstay of our existence, disappeared from our land. The governments of Canada and the United States promised to help. In return they forced us to live on reserves, to give up our ancient beliefs and to stop speaking our own language. The governments thought we would either die off or be assimilated. We have survived. Much has changed in our culture, and many young people have difficulty learning our language. But the core values of our culture are still important to us. Our ceremonies continue to affirm our connection with all of the natural world (Blackfoot Gallery Committee, 2013, 10).*

Among the traditions, practices and customs that remain important to the Blackfoot Confederacy, particularly given the decline of the wild bison herds, are the elk hunt, the beaver hunt, traditional commerce and trade (including robes, furs, hides, pipes, kettles and firearms), the gathering of native plant species for subsistence, medicinal and ceremonial use, the use of plants and timber for arts, crafts, fuel and construction, and the harvesting of several wild game species for subsistence, cultural and spiritual purposes (such as for use in the sacred bundles) (Blackfoot Gallery Committee, 2013, 51-69).

Blackfoot culture and traditions, as they are practiced today, are based both in practices and in specific places that have significance to the community. As Pat Provost put it, “the white people thought that they were coming into empty land. We had a life and a system going here and it’s still ongoing” (Blackfoot Gallery Committee, 2013, 67). Important to the Blackfoot way of life, or system, are specific places. Some of these places are very specific, such as Chief Mountain or Okotoks, or Writing on Stone, but there are other less famous places where sacred rock art can be found, or where there were buffalo jumps, wintering camps, and traditional trails, including the traditional trail along the foothills to the Bow River (Blackfoot Gallery Committee, 2013, 71).

Within Blood Tribe culture, the land is believed to be sacred. “The land was not to be deliberately destroyed or damaged. The land was there to provide food for daily survival” (Treaty 7 Elders et al., 1996, 83). The importance of the land – that is, the traditional territory – for the cultural and material survival of the Blood Tribe is expressed by Elder Adam Delaney: “the traditional territory of the Blackfoot Nation was given to our people by our Creator. We respected and protected this traditional territory with our minds and our hearts, and we depended on it for what it encompasses for our survival. Everything that we ever needed for our way of life and survival existed in our traditional territory, such as herbs for medicine, roots, rivers, game animals, berries, vegetables, the buffalo” (Adam Delaney in Treaty 7 Elders et al., 1996, 85).

Within the traditional territory of BT/K, harvesting traditional resources and the movements of the people have seasons: “During the summer we picked berries and hunted and just before fall we dried meat; in this way we were well prepared for the winter. We knew winter was near when migrating birds began to fly south. The old people would look at the sun and when it’s at a certain point it will tell them how cold the winter will be. Then they would move to the river where there are a lot of trees. We used the trees for firewood, also for shelter from the cold winter” (Rosie Red Crow in Treaty 7 Elders et al, 1996, 85).

Although the confinement of the Blood Tribe to the reserve after Treaty 7 had an impact on the Blood’s traditional prairie way of life, most markedly the loss of the bison, hunting wild game and harvesting berries continued to be important for subsistence. According to Dick Nice Cutter, “hunting was our heritage. Everything we kill we use it all” (Nice Cutter in Treaty 7 Elders, 1996, 98). Nice Cutter described how in the early years on the reserve, the economy changed so there was more reliance on agriculture but even then, there were “no restrictions on hunting” in the early years after Treaty (Nice Cutter in Treaty 7 Elders, 1996, 98). Hunting wild game and harvesting wild foods remain important elements of the Blood Tribe’s way of life to the present.

The Káínai worldview, akin to what Leroy Little Bear has called Blackfoot Metaphysics, is based on balance, interconnectedness of animate beings, and energy, and is described by Crop Eared Wolf:

*In Blackfoot, the concept of the flux, the constant change or unpredictability inherent in life, is expressed as mátaommita'pii. The understanding that everything is alive, imbued with energy or spirit and interacts, along with observations of continual change, and perceptions of causality through action or inaction leads to the conclusion that there is a relationship among all the life forms within the world. The world is comprised of the Source of Life, lihtsipáitapiiyo'pa, who gave order, ninsstáwa'pii, to the people; those who travel the earth (animals), káwa'pomaahkaiksi; those who fly (birds), ipóttaiiksi; those of the water and those of the sky, sspomítapiiksi; and the earth, ksááhkomiiitapi. The land, minerals, water and plant life are regarded as having spirit and capable of entering into relationships with the people. It is observed that a change in any one of these life forms affects the spirit or balance of others, áakohtohkimiaaw, kiai áaka'pohpatsskimiaaw. Thus, the relational network, comprised of all the life forms or inhabitants of the environment, perpetuates this constant change (2007, 118)*

Awareness of how changes to the environment can affect the balance of other relationships between beings is an essential part of Blood Tribe/Káínai Traditional Knowledge.