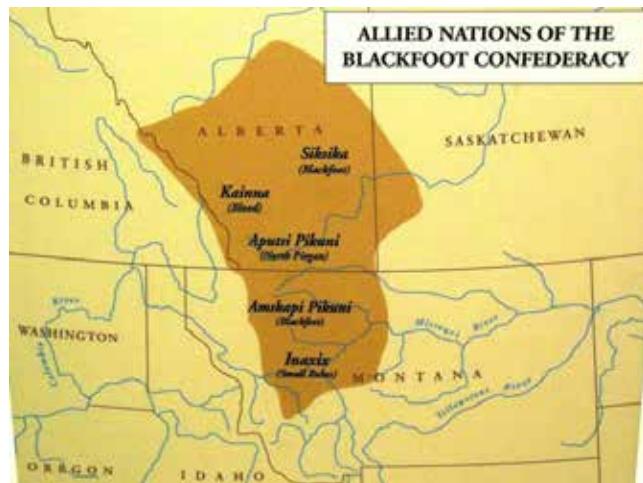


The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

The Blackfoot Confederacy - History and Culture: an Introduction

The Blackfoot Confederacy refers to four Indigenous nations which make up the Blackfoot people. Three of these - the Siksika (Blackfoot), the Kainai (Blood) and the Northern Piegan reside in the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia in Canada. The fourth nation, the Southern Piegan, are located in the United States. The nations have their own separate governments ruled by a chief, but come together for religious and social celebrations.



Map of Blackfoot Territory

The Blackfoot Confederacy refers to itself as Niitsitapi or 'the people' and their traditional territory as Niitsitpiis-stahkooi or 'Original Peoples Land'. This territory stretched from the North Saskatchewan River, in the area where Edmonton is today, south to the Yellowstone River of Montana, and west from the Rocky Mountains to east past the Cypress Hills. Due to cultural and language patterns, anthropologists believe the *Niitsitapi* originated from the upper Northeastern part of North America and, by 1200, began moving west in search of more land, eventually settling in the Great Plains. Whatever the nations' origins, the confederacy is considered to be the oldest residents of the western prairie region.



Alfred Jacob Miller
Hunting Buffalo, approx. 1858
Walters Art Museum
Baltimore, Maryland

The Blackfoot Confederacy was a buffalo-hunting culture. During the summers they followed the bison herds as they migrated between what are now the United States and Canada. The bison were used for meat while fur and tanned hides, sinew, bones and dung were used for clothing, shelter, decoration, tools and fuel. The Blackfoot nations also hunted deer, moose, mountain sheep and other large game while women gathered berries and root vegetables. In the fall the people would begin shifting to their wintering areas, in camps along wooded river valleys, where they remained for almost half the year.

Before the introduction of the horse, the *Niitsitapi* hunted bison in two main ways. First, they often used camouflage to creep up close to the feeding herds. Hunters would take bison skins and drape them over their bodies to blend in and mask their scent. In this way they could get close to the bison and, when close enough, attach with arrows or spears. A second method used for hunting was using 'buffalo jumps'. Hunters would direct the bison into V-shaped pens and then drive them over cliffs. Afterwards hunters would go to the bottom of the cliff and harvest

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as much of the animals as they could carry. One of the more famous buffalo jump sites is at Head-Smashed-In, Alberta.

The introduction of horses to the western Plains in the early 1700s revolutionized

Blackfoot life. Horses were used for hunting and made both following and harvesting the buffalo herds much easier than previously. Besides their use in hunting, the introduction of horses also allowed for a significant expansion of Blackfoot territory. The Blackfoot were traditional enemies of a number of other Indigenous groups such as the Crow, Cheyenne, Sioux, the Shoshone, Flathead, Nez Perce and their most dangerous enemies, the Plains Cree and their allies the Stoney and Saulteaux.

The Shoshone acquired horses much earlier than the Blackfoot and soon occupied much of present-day Alberta, most of Montana, and parts of Wyoming. Once the Blackfoot gained access to horses in the early 1700s, however, they pushed back and by 1787 explorer David Thompson reported that the Blackfoot had conquered most of Shoshone territory and controlled the territory from the North Saskatchewan River in the north to the Missouri River in the south.

The Blackfoot came into contact with Euro-American hunters and traders by the mid 18th century.

In 1754 Anthony Henday of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) met a large Blackfoot group in what is now Alberta. The HBC encouraged the Blackfoot to trade by setting up posts, such as Fort Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House, along the North Saskatchewan River. While trade enabled the Blackfoot Confederacy to become the richest and most powerful group in the Western plains, contact also exposed the Indigenous peoples to infectious diseases. In 1837 the Niitsitapi contracted smallpox. This outbreak eventually killed 6,000 people and effectively ended Blackfoot dominance on the plains.

While the Blackfoot, like other Indigenous groups, often had hostile relationships with Euro-North American traders, trappers and settlers, they largely stayed out of the major conflicts of the 1800s. When the Sioux approached the Blackfoot for assistance in their war with the United States Army in the 1870s, Crowfoot, one of the most influential Blackfoot chiefs, dismissed them and threatened to join with the North West Mounted Police to fight them if they ever came back to Blackfoot territory. The Blackfoot also chose to stay out of the Northwest Rebellion, led by Louis Riel, in 1885.

The Blackfoot Confederacy was one of the last First Nations group to enter into treaties with the American and Canadian governments. By the 1860s and 1870s the virtual extermination of the buffalo by European-American hunters and government policies coupled with encroaching settlement in what is now the United States and outbreaks of disease



Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo-Jump
near Fort Macleod, Alberta

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Crowfoot
1830-1890



Red Crow
1830-1900

made Indigenous peoples more and more dependent on government assistance. A treaty was signed on the American side of the 49th parallel in 1855 but it was not until 1877 that the Blackfoot signed Treaty 7 in Canada.

Treaty 7 was primarily a peace treaty intended to facilitate a means of peaceful co-existence with the white government. Key signatories for the Blackfoot Confederacy were Chief Crowfoot of the Siksika and Chief Red Crow of the Kainai. Treaty 7 involved an area of 50,000 square miles of land south of the Red Deer River and adjacent to the Rock Mountains. The Kainai had a reserve of land designated for them along the Bow River. Red Crow, however, was not consulted on this, preferring traditional lands further south, and so refused to settle the Kainai on the reserved lands. In 1882 a new reserve for the Kainai, comprised of 708.4 square miles, was surveyed with a southern boundary set at 9 miles from the border with the United States. In 1883, however, this land was re-surveyed without consulting the Kainai and reduced to 547.5 square miles. The Kainai have never accepted these various adjustments and continue to advance the claims to the lands identified by Chief Red Crow.

Traditionally, the peoples of the Blackfoot Confederacy were nomadic buffalo hunters with a fluid but highly organized social structure. Because of the nomadic nature of their lives, the people were divided into many bands which ranged in size from 10 to 30 lodges, or about 80 to 240 people. The band was the basic unit of organization for hunting and defence and consisted of several households that lived and worked together. Band membership was fluid and typically coalesced around bonds of kinship and friendship where family was highly valued. Bands came together during times of celebration or war to form tribes or nations which are groupings that are culturally and linguistically related.

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In tribes, leadership skills were highly valued. During times of peace the people would elect a peace chief who could lead the people and improve relations with other tribes. During times of war a war chief was chosen. This role, however, was not elected but needed to be earned by those who had successfully performed various acts of bravery. Within the Blackfoot nation there were also different societies, such as war, religious or women's societies, to which people belonged. Each of these societies had functions within the tribe and members were invited into societies after proving themselves by recognized passages and rituals.

The Blackfoot continue many of the cultural traditions of the past and hope to extend these to their children. There is a significant effort to learn Pikuni, the official language of the Blackfoot, and various societies and ceremonies previously banned, such as the Sun Dance, have been revived.



Sundance ceremony, 1908
Library and Archives of Canada