

past that museums had in their collections surprised me. These things were seen mainly as ‘inventory,’ dead and fully separated from their living human context. The insensitive way medicine bundles and other sacred objects were often handled by museum staff back then disturbed me. New people have entered this field since then with more consideration, respect, and understanding of today’s Blackfeet. Appreciation has developed for the importance of ancestral artifacts to efforts at keeping alive the nation’s culture. A major result of these changing attitudes has been the negotiated repatriations of many important sacred bundles from museums. Some tribe members still complain, saying there should be no Blackfoot artifacts in museums at all, that they should be given back to the people. Rumors have often claimed that cultural things were stolen from the people, else purchased from them fraudulently. However, the facts rarely support these claims. Over the years I’ve known many elders who sold cultural artifacts, from their children’s navel pouches to their grandmother’s Sun Dance bundles, or even their own Medicine Pipe bundles. Not one of them said they were forced to give up these things. None claimed to have been swindled, or even underpaid. Until the 1970’s, tribal elders saw no signs of cultural revival among their young. They were sure that they would be the last “traditional” generation, and they fully expected the old Blackfoot traditions would die out with them, as they nearly did. If there had been a few more years of selling “relics and bundles,” they would have all been gone and the ceremonies would have come to an end. It happened with many other tribes. But for some reason it didn’t with the Blackfeet.

It would be unfair for us to judge those past people’s actions based on what we know today. We could wish they hadn’t sold sacred things, but at that time there was little choice. If they didn’t sell while still alive, their next of kin usually did so soon after they died, or even before, taking the money for doing nothing, then often spending it foolishly afterwards. Some old people preferred selling their things to museums instead of private collectors so that at least they would still be able to go and see them whenever they wanted.

In writing down these stories from old people, one big challenge has been deciding how much to change what they say. There are usually a lot of repetitions and pauses in taped visits, words are often left out,

with the listener expected to know how to fill them in. While I consider it an obligation of trust to maintain an original storyteller’s style and meaning, quoting everything directly into a book would often make for difficult reading.

My own preference has been to write down what an elder was trying to say, then bring it to them afterwards for corrections or further comments. It didn’t always work out, as some elders passed away before I could get their tapes translated. Some changes were also made to the wording in old stories recorded long ago by others, though always while striving to maintain the integrity of what had been said. If it seemed that a previous writer had changed the actual integrity of any story to suit his own work, I usually left it out of this work altogether. All the stories in these books can be considered reasonably accurate and authentic, no matter what time period they are from. If you are a Pikunni today, and you read on these pages any story that your mom and dad, or your grandmother, told differently, please keep in mind that in an oral society, each storyteller has a tendency to put in his or her own thoughts and emphasis. Seldom is there complete agreement among storytellers regarding their variations.

It didn’t take long to learn when someone was giving definite photo identifications, as opposed to just guessing. I wrote down what everyone said and put their initials by it in my notes. With time, after showing the same photo to five or six different elders, it generally became clear who was right or wrong, and who among them didn’t really know much.

In quoting from books, I have focused on stories by and about Pikunni people, often deleting other material with a series of four periods, like this.... Hopefully the footnotes and bibliography will satisfy those who want to read “the rest of the story” as originally published. One exception to my not using non-biographic material written by others is whenever a researcher or writer has described an important aspect of Pikunni history and culture in such a concise way that it would be useless for me to say the same thing over in my own words.

Regarding the Blackfoot words printed in this book: There are mistakes in each of the various Blackfoot language dictionaries that have been printed over the past century or so, and each one has its linguistic and native student critics. As the compiler of these vol-

umes, I’ve taken the liberty of presenting Blackfoot words in the way that I’ve learned them. For instance, a is pronounced ah, while a written ah means the a is long. A common sound in Blackfoot words is a soft b, sometimes written bh, or a soft g, which could be written as gh. Blackfoot shares the distinct guttural sound of ch with German, so that ‘ach-kuineman,’ the Blackfoot word for pipe, starts out sounding the same as ach-tung (attention). It is a sound easily made by children, but difficult to learn after that.

Some readers will wish that this book used the style of their own favorite dictionary, so here is a further explanation. The Blackfoot language was never written, so it cannot be learned properly from a book. If you already know how to speak Blackfoot, you will understand most of the Blackfoot words in this book, and know how to pronounce them. If you do not speak Blackfoot, it would not matter how the Blackfoot words were written in this book, you would still not pronounce them properly. To learn conversational Blackfoot, one needs to hear it and speak it, not read it.

In my early years of study and research, I filled a spiral notebook with facts, comments and quotes that caught my interest. Sometimes I forgot to write down all the technical information, like page numbers and other details—though I made sure not to miss the names of those who were writing or speaking. On hindsight I would take many more footnotes—with my own interviews as well—but to go back now and fill in those gaps would delay these books even more.

Because there was no funding during my 44 years of work on these books, I could not hire assistants, typists, researchers, or other help.. Until the books were actually being prepared for publication, all work on them was mine, therefore the faults and shortcomings probably are too. I apologize in advance, especially if I left someone or something of importance out by mistake. Profits from the sale of these books will be used for programs to support Blackfeet heritage and culture. Contact those listed at the front pages for further information.

Adolf Hungry-Wolf  
Canadian Rockies,  
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