

## Blackfeet Tribe

The Blackfeet tribe, the most feared and powerful in all of Montana, lived originally in the upper Mississippi Region of Minnesota and Canada. They were pushed by white settlement and Eastern tribes onto the Great Plains and finally into northern Montana, where their territory extended south to the Yellowstone River and west to the Rocky Mountains. The Blackfeet tribe consists of three groups: the Blackfeet, the Piegan, and the Blood. The Piegan and Blackfeet today live in Montana, while the Bloods live mainly in Canada.

The first hostile encounter between the Blackfeet and whites was in 1806, when two Blackfeet were killed in a fight with Captain Lewis of the Lewis and Clark Expedition on the Marias River. Some people believe that it was this incident that caused the Blackfeet to be so hostile to whites.

Fur trappers and trading companies attempting to establish trade with the Blackfeet had little success for many years. John Colter's famous escape from the Blackfeet in 1809 resulted from his attempt to establish the fur trade with the Blackfeet for Manuel Lisa's Missouri Fur Company. In 1810, Andrew Henry, also of the Missouri Fur Company, built a fur post at the Three Forks but he was forced to abandon it due to

continual attacks by the Blackfeet. Attempts to trap and trade in Blackfeet territory by the Missouri Fur Company and later the Rocky Mountain Fur Company were defeated by the Blackfeet.

The American Fur Company was the first to finally establish trade with the Blackfeet. In 1831 Kenneth McKenzie of the American Fur Company's Upper Missouri Outfit negotiated a peace with the Blackfeet and built Fort Piegan on the mouth of the Marias River. Ft. Piegan was replaced by Fort MacKenzie in 1832. Alexander Culbertson of the UMO, who was married to a Blackfeet woman and was very influential with the Blackfeet, successfully traded with them at Fort MacKenzie and later at Fort Benton.

There was little demand for Blackfeet land at first. Although they did not actually sign the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, they were given a large territory of all the land north of the Mussellshell River, east to the Dakota border, west to the Rocky Mountains, and north to Canada.

When demand arose for a railroad to provide a quicker route to the Pacific Coast, a man named Isaac Stevens was sent by the U. S. Government to survey a railroad route through Indian land. He negotiated the Treaty of 1855, which was known as "Lame Bull's Treaty" after the Piegan chief who signed it. The Blackfeet and their allies the Gros

Ventres were promised all the territory north of the Missouri River and east to the Milk River in addition to hunting lands to the south. The Blackfeet promised to live at peace in exchange for annuities.

With the end of the Civil War and the discovery of gold, more and more settlers passed through Blackfeet land, and hostilities increased. Both Indians and whites were killed. Another treaty was negotiated in 1865, in which the Blackfeet ceded some of their land. This treaty was never ratified by the U.S. Congress, however, and the Blackfeet never received their promised payments, causing them to fight among themselves over hunting grounds and to increase attacks on white settlers. The frightened whites demanded protection, so the Army built Camp Cook at the mouth of the Marias River in 1866 and Fort Shaw in the Sun River Valley in 1867. The Blackfeet, however, continued their raids on white settlements.

In 1868, another treaty between the Blackfeet and the U.S. Government was negotiated. However, Congress again refused to ratify it. The Indians did not understand why they did not receive their payments, and murders of both whites and Indians increased.

In 1869, a small band of young Indians killed Malcolm Clark, a rancher north of Helena who had a Blackfeet wife and was considered

friendly to the Indians. The white settlers, who were very upset, demanded retaliation. Colonel E.M. Baker at Fort Ellis demanded that the Blackfeet turn in the guilty people themselves, but they did nothing. Baker set out to attack Mountain Chief's band, where he believed the young Indians were hiding, but attacked the friendly band of Heavy Runner by mistake, killing 173 Piegans, including up to 90 women and children. The Blackfeet, already suffering from a smallpox epidemic, saw the power of the whites and ended their resistance on that day. They never fought the U.S. Army again.

In 1873, by an executive order of President U.S. Grant, the boundaries of a large reservation for the Blackfeet, Gros Ventres, Assiniboines and River Crows were established, east of the Rocky Mountains to the mouth of the Milk River and north of the Missouri River and the Sun River. White ranchers who were running cattle on the land north of the Sun River refused to give up that land, however, so in 1874 the southern boundary was moved north to Birch Creek and the Marias River. The Blackfeet never agreed to this change in their boundary.

The Blackfeet continued to hunt buffalo, and were not interested in farming or ranching as the U.S. Government was encouraging them to do. By 1883, however, the buffalo were gone and during the years of 1883-1884

many Blackfeet starved to death. From then on, the majority of Blackfeet lived near the Indian agency near the site of Browning, and depended on the government for food.

In 1888, the Blackfeet ceded more of their land in exchange for government assistance, and received their own reservation separate from the Gros Ventres, Assiniboines, and Crows. In 1896, the mountains on the western edge of the reservation, which is now Glacier National Park, were sold by the tribe under pressure from people who wanted to search for gold. At that point the Blackfeet Reservation had its present boundaries. The center of the Blackfeet Reservation is the town of Browning.