

Oral Presentation Notes & Educational Resources

Summer 2022, Museum of the Plains Indian / Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Browning, MT
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CONTEXT

- Blackfeet Reservation: 1.5 million acres (bigger than Delaware), population 10,000 --over 96% Indian
- **Blackfeet Tribe: 17,300 members, about half live here, most others live in the Seattle / Portland area**
- Like most NW Indians, we all have Anglo, French, or Indian-sounding surnames
- **This is our true homeland: 15,000 years / 500 generations, place of creation (Badger Two Medicine) is 20 miles away**
- Blackfoot Confederacy is 4 tribes: us (the Blackfeet / Southern Piegan / Amskapi Piikani) and 3 sister tribes in Canada: Siksika (Blackfoot), Kai Nai (Blood), Northern Piegan (Aapátohsipikáni)
- **Blackfeet or Blackfeet? Largely clerical: Our U.S. treaty used the word Blackfeet, Canadian treaties used Blackfoot**
- We have our own laws, constitution, courts, government, healthcare, police, schools. Montana has no authority
- **Call us Indian or Native American? We say Indian but Pacific tribes usually prefer Native American**
- Fewer than 1% of Americans belong to a tribe and only half of us live on reservations (due to WWII)
- **Indian Country: 574 tribes (incl 231 in Alaska), 326 lower-48 reservations, very few are still on ancestral lands**
- Most Indians weren't granted U.S. citizenship until 1924 and many couldn't vote until the 1950s
- **Map of pre-1491 tribal homelands / Uses of the Buffalo / Blackfeet history. Go to: americanindianpartnership.org**

The Museum has countless things you've never seen before and may never see again

THREE MUST-SEE THINGS YOU WILL NEVER FORGET

- 1a & 1b - **The human spirit can create perfection even in a time of great despair and grief:** White brain-tanned chief suit (Smithsonian marveled at this) & gold war suit, standing side-by-side
- 2 - **It could have been made 10,000 years ago, except for purple...:** Gold quilled war shirt
- 3 - **Impossible then, more impossible now:** Quilled bag (baby porcupine quills)

LOBBY MURAL: To Understand Us, First Understand The Buffalo Hunt

- Painted by Victor Pepion for the 1941 Museum opening, fresco, looks like the day it was unveiled
- Panel 1: Where, Who, When is this? All warriors seek their own look, but How? *(The answers are all there)*
- Panel 2: Salvation and survival... or murder? *(To kill a buffalo the moral way, risk your life amidst thunder, danger, chaos)*
- Panel 3: Men protect, hunt, raid, fight. Women run camp. *(One small clue precisely dates this panel, see it?)*
- Panel 4: Camps are set up around the hunt. *(And tipis aren't painted for decoration, each has a meaning)*
- When people think of Indians, they usually mentally-picture buffalo-tribes because we were the ones most capable of fighting the U.S. Army in the Indian Wars. But Only 15 of 574 tribes / 1 of 2,000 Americans look like that (Arapaho, Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kiowa, Plains Apache, Plains Cree, Plains Ojibwe, Sarsi, Shoshone, Sioux, Tonkawa)

BEADS

- **Every bead** in the Museum came from **Bohemia** (now Czech Republic) or **Venice** (island of Murano)
- French, English, or American trappers brought the beads here seeking to trade for furs
- Small, colorful, molded "seed" beads came to America in 1840s, causing the bead & fur trade to explode
- From the 1700s we traded for European, hand-made "pony" beads
- For thousands of years before Europeans came we used porcupine quills
- Today we have many thousands of beaders on the rez, but fewer than a dozen active quill workers

QUILLS

In the old days on the prairie, the LAST THREE THINGS you wanted to see were...

- A party of: Blackfeet, Plains Apache, or Comanche. Most Indians are pretty nice... but **THESE GUYS...!**
- The Blackfeet made enemies of almost everyone so we lived backs to the Rockies, river valleys in front
- Seeing Blackfeet was like seeing a polar bear or Vikings --making a run for it was the only way to see tomorrow
- (We are much nicer now, though)

THREE PHASES: How the U.S. Solved Its Indian Problem

- Phase 1 (1830-1850, Eastern U.S.): Round up all the Indian and march them off (e.g. Trail of Tears)
- Phase 2 (1840s-1870 West Coast): Put a California-sanctioned bounty on their heads and murder them
- Phase 3 (1865-1890s mid-continent): Who Knew!? Buffalo-tribe Indians kill from horseback better than U.S. Army soldiers, can shoot 10 arrows to one muzzleloader reload. But then came repeaters and gattling guns
- 3a: Warriors want to die in battle, but don't want their loved ones to die, so we signed treaties, and the U.S created large, widely-spaced INTERNMENT CAMPS in the middle of the country (Indian census 1885-1940 to count prisoners)
- 3b: You're standing on one right now. Today the barbed wire is gone and they're called reservations
- 3c: Treaties didn't give us land (we already had the land). Treaties bought the lives of soldiers & settlers
- **3d: Now you know why all the largest tribes with large, isolated reservations are in the middle of U.S.**