Big Nose and His Painted Elk Skin

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a number of veteran Plains Indian warriors were commissioned to paint their war histories and provide accompanying verbal explanations of the depicted events. These important sources of primary information add significantly to our understanding of earlier, poorly documented war exploit paintings and rock art. As well, a look at the formalistic qualities of these commissioned works against the background of events surrounding their execution tells us much about contemporaneous reservation life and relations between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. The present study centers on the elk skin painting and accompanying explanations which Big Nose, a Piegan chief, was commissioned to execute in 1893-1894.

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At first glance it might seem peculiar that Captain Lorenzo W. Cooke, an Indian Agent on the Blackfeet Reservation who held native traditions in disdain, would go to GREAT lengths to collect the life story of Big Nose (Mokska-atose), a Blackfeet chief who had little respect for the ways of the Whiteman. But then Cooke was a military man, Big Nose was a great warrior, and a Blackfeet warrior’s life story was typically synonymous with his war history. Big Nose recorded his brave deeds in pictographic scenes painted with European manufactured pigments on an elk skin and accompanied these with verbal explanations which Cooke transcribed in writing. The combination of these visual and textual documents opens a fascinating window into Blackfeet life in the nomadic and early reservation years.

In The Story of the Indian, a fictional recreation of the nomadic days based on stories “told to [him] by the Indians themselves,” George Bird Grinnell (1896:IX) described Big Nose’s camp on the buffalo plains, as follows:

Close at hand is a lodge larger than those near to it, and shining white and new in the moonlight. On the cow skins are drawn many pictures which tell of the [war] history of its owner, and before the door are tied four horses, his swiftest and best. This is the lodge of Three Suns (Grinnell 1896:12).

Typically, a Blackfeet man’s name would change several times during his life. According to the label accompanying Shorty White Grass’s war exploit painting at a Glacier Park Hotel, Three Suns’ (Ninokskatosti) name as a boy was Bear Chief (Ninok-chiau), and as an old man changed to Big Nose which, “of course, arose from the abnormal size of his nose” (Eagleleaf and Heavybreast ca. 1920:Panel No. 26). Indeed the only photograph found of Big Nose lends credence to Shorty’s description (Figure 1). Karl Bodmer’s 1833 portrait of Big Nose’s father, Bear Chief, shows a family resemblance, also echoed in the words of Bodmer’s employer, Prince Maximilian who wrote, “The Chief of the Bears was quite an original: his countenance, which was not very handsome, with a large crooked nose, was partly hid by his long hair” (Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1982:100). Maximilian also noted that Bear Chief was “the most respected chief among the Blackfeet” (Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1982:100). Big Nose was a young boy when Bodmer painted his father, but according to Grinnell (1913) by 1850 he had become an important man among the Blackfeet and remained so until his death in 1896.
Figure 1. Photograph (cropped) of Chief Big Nose taken in 1881. Photographer unknown. Catalog Number 955-465. Courtesy of the Montana Historical Society.

(Schaeffer 1934–1954 gives his year of death as 1896 and 1898).

An incident noted by Claude Schaeffer (1934–1954:13–18), told to him around 1950 by Charles Revais, indicates that Big Nose's role as a leader was predestined at an early age. Big Nose's father had cleverly convinced a war party of 61 enemy Crow to visit a Piegan camp on the Sun River. At the same time a messenger was sent to call for Piegan warriors in the main camp on the Missouri. Each of the arriving warriors was instructed to break off a twig in the fire hole of his gun to block the spark from entering the barrel. Then they held a gun trade with the Crow. Later, they proposed moving to the main camp for a dance. On the way, in one of the coulees running into the Sun River between Fort Shaw and Great Falls, the Piegan fired upon the Crow. Those not mortally wounded froze to death in the bitter cold. The stiff bodies of the Crow were all stood up against the bank of the coulee. Bear Chief, who was credited with the victory, gave his coup stick to his son, Big Nose, and told him to tap each of the 61 dead Crows with his stick. This was considered to be the first war honor of his son who, at the time, was about ten years of age. To commemorate the event, Bear Chief made gifts to his people. As the Piegan were short of ammunition, he spread out four blankets and poured out caps on the first, powder on the second, lead balls on the third and tobacco on the fourth.

Early in his youth Big Nose sought a dream or vision to bring him war medicine. According to Heavy Eyes (Schultz 1923:280), he used a human skull as a pillow until he received a powerful vision. Morning Star himself came to Big Nose and offered to become his spirit helper. At the age of twelve, Big Nose went on his first raid. He and six Piegans successfully captured Crow horses; however, in their flight Big Nose became separated from the party. During his several days alone, he had a dream in which the weasel (or otter?) gave him the power of invulnerability in warfare and the ability to foresee the enemy's location. Correspondingly, his medicine became the joined skins of weasel and otter with small bells attached, worn "suspended from his shoulder across his chest" (Schaeffer 1934–1954:4). This medicine carried Big Nose unscathed through a long and illustrious career as
a warrior.

Big Nose became head of the Grease Melters, the most populous of the South Piegan bands, soon after October 21, 1872, when the former leader, Generous Woman, passed away. At the same time, he became the biggest rival of White Calf, the head chief of the Piegan nation. Big Nose is said to have represented the conservative, non-Christian faction while White Calf lead the Christian progressives. Many of John Ewers’ informants regarded Big Nose as the real head of the tribe, claiming that he had a larger following than White Calf. Perhaps because writers found he was more approachable, White Calf holds a place of honor in the history books while Big Nose has been largely overlooked (Ewers 1958:285).

Captain Lorenzo Cooke was only on the Blackfeet Reservation for about a year, 1893–1894, yet it was time enough to establish a reputation as a strict disciplinarian. On the positive side, he “encouraged [the Blackfeet] to take care of their cattle, prevented traders from cheating them, kept whites off their range and limited whiskey trade” (Dietert 1992:64). However, Ewers (1958:310–11) learned that he had little tolerance for Blackfeet traditions. In 1893 he ordered two old Sundance frames to be torn down to use the timbers for corrals. He prohibited the Sundance as well as “Indian mourning, beating the tom-tom, gambling, and wearing Indian costumes” (Ewers 1958:310–11). He asked traders not to stock the paints used in Blackfeet ceremonies and is even said to have threatened to jail women for doing beadwork.

Despite the apparent differences between the two men, the documentation clearly indicates that Lorenzo W. Cooke acquired his painted elk skin directly from Big Nose. Cooke’s son, Major L. I. Cooke, sent a typed copy of the stories pictured on the hide to James Willard Schultz on March 30, 1940, along with a letter stating: “Thought you might be interested in the enclosure, which is a copy of the notes descriptive of the various scenes portrayed on that elk skin by Big Nose. 2 You doubtless have heard him hold forth on some of them!” (Schultz 1940). Several months later, on November 1, 1941, Cooke’s son sent the painted hide from his home in San Diego, along with the “descriptive notes explaining the pictures, as transcribed by me from pencil notes made by my father,” to the Minnesota Historical Society (Cooke 1941). After Schultz died in 1947, his wife published Cooke’s account of Big Nose’s exploits, verbatim with the exception of a few spelling corrections, along with other material from her husband’s files (Schultz 1962:264). John J. Jackson (2000:205) published a revised account based on the same text, with added contextual information. However, both publications fall short of integrating the pictorial account with the verbal. The illustration reproduced here in Figure 2, is based on a tracing of the original. Before taking a detailed look at the events portrayed on the skin and their written explanations, we might first ask ourselves how Big Nose’s war record came to be painted, translated and placed in Cooke’s possession.

In the days of incessant tribal warfare, a successful warrior enjoyed great social recognition. To ensure that the community did not lose sight of his elevated status, he sometimes wore a record of his achievements painted on his buffalo robe. In 1832 George Catlin (1926:279) observed proud warriors “exhibiting on their backs as they walk” their exploits of bravery. The buffalo robe was always worn lengthwise around the body, “with the tail end folded over [the wearer’s] front from the right first, then the head end folded from the left” (Wilson 1915:231–32). Correspondingly, the painted figures were oriented so as to appear upright when the robe was worn. In contrast, Big Nose drew his figures in a multitude of directions, seemingly dictated by his position as he painted his way around the perimeter of the hide. The hide itself, measuring some 270 cm long by 219 cm wide (8 ft 11 in by 7 ft 2 in), is too big for wearing and not dressed to be pliable enough for that purpose.

Indeed, with the demise of the buffalo and the winding down of warfare, so too the practice of painting robes must have come to a halt. Ewers (1958:301) noted that it was “Not until collectors of ethnological specimens began to encourage veterans of intertribal wars to record their war deeds on skins was there a slight revival of the decadent old art of robe painting.” Ewers’ infor-
Figure 2. Electronic redrawing of Big Nose’s robe based on a tracing of the original made with the kind permission of the
ments told him of another practice which Blackfeet painters adopted around the beginning of twentieth century to better sell their war histories to whites. They “took pains to set off one episode from others by lines, so as to be able to make these pictures more comprehensible to persons who were not accustomed to viewing Indian war histories” (Ewers 1983:58). On Big Nose’s painting not only are lines drawn around events, but numbers inscribed on the hide key each event to its written translation. Unlike the topsy-turvy orientation of events, the numbers are unidirectional, perhaps applied by Cooke or his interpreter.

Big Nose’s painting is the earliest of eleven Blackfeet hide paintings found to have lines drawn around events. The Royal Ontario Museum has four such works commissioned in 1908 by the artist/ethnologist Edmund Morris (Brownstone 1993). The remaining paintings were executed more recently. In addition, there are five paintings by Sarcee, traditional allies of the Blackfeet, which have this feature. Only seven of the Blackfeet and Sarcee paintings have both delineating lines and numbers keyed to explanations. All the above paintings, except that of Big Nose, originate in Alberta. Sharp’s painting, executed on the Montana Blackfeet Reservation, is also comparable to Big Nose’s painting. In a letter to the Minnesota Historical Society Ewers (1955) stated, “I can’t help but think that there must have been some connection between a war record painted by the Piegan Indian Sharp in 1892 on a steer hide for Dr. Z.T. Daniel, Reservation Doctor, and [Big Nose’s painting]... the style of painting on the two hides is apparently identical – the methods of painting horses and humans.” Although almost certainly painted by different individuals, the pictographic records of Sharp and Big Nose were both collected with written explanations which are remarkable in their detail. Big Nose’s painting is almost unique in providing dates for the various events it records. In view of the documentation and physical features of Big Nose’s painting, there can be little doubt that Cooke commissioned the painting from Big Nose along with explanations in Blackfeet which were simultaneously translated into English by an interpreter and written out by the collector.

While Big Nose clearly tailored his elk skin painting to be more comprehensible to Lorenzo Cooke, in presenting a record of his war exploits to a white man of influence he followed a practice which had a long history among Plains Indian chiefs. In the 1820s, Painted Feather and Bull’s Back Fat, two Blackfoot chiefs, presented their personal war exploit robes to Hudson’s Bay Company officials (Garry 1900:203). In 1909 four Peigan chiefs from Alberta painted their exploits on a buffalo hide largely because they knew it would be displayed in the Ontario legislative building (Brownstone 1993:35). Sitting Bull, the Hunkpapa chief, presented a war exploit robe to the Pope around 1886 (Smith 1943:192) and before that his exploits drawn in pictographs on paper to the commander of Fort Buford, General Morrow (Smith 1943:174).

Chief Big Nose was heavily involved in tribal politics during very difficult times. In September 1883, he tried to influence U.S. government representatives to avoid an impending disaster:

... the winter is close. You see how poor we are; there is no buffalo: we are on the verge of starvation. I would like to know if anything will be done this winter. If not, it will be too late for many; they will starve (Ewers 1958:291).

Hoping to solve Blackfeet economic problems in 1887, Big Nose signed his name at the top of the list of Piegangs, just below White Calf’s, who agreed to sell a large piece of their reservation. Unfortunately, the money from the sale resulted in little good and on January 25, 1894, Agent Cooke addressed 32 influential Blackfeet asking them to consider another land cessation, the mountains alongside the future Glacier National Park. This time the Blackfeet were determined to negotiate more successfully. On September 20, 1895, Big Nose, who was very active in the negotiations, announced, “We are here to sell some land that is of little use to us... If you wish to give us a good price, we will be pleased” (Diettert 1992:67). Five days later both parties agreed on a price. Big Nose painted his history for Cooke in 1893–1894 during these crucial negotiations, so it would seem that the chief, in presenting his war record to the agent, was following a long established tradition of asserting his power as a leader.
of one nation to that of another.

In this light, **Big Nose**’s painting is in tune with both traditional practice and changing social circumstances and foreshadows the war exploit paintings made for installation in the Glacier Park hotels. From around 1913 to 1920, 38 Piegan painted at least 69 canvas panels which were installed in park hotels. In the 1920s several more paintings were commissioned, including three which were over 50 feet in length. The wave of interest in pictographic Indian war stories spread over the border, and in 1927 15 Bloods painted 35 panels for the Prince of Wales Hotel in Waterton Park, Alberta. Although essentially traditional, the content of these paintings shifted significantly away from war exploits, giving new emphasis to hunting incidents and sponsorship of religious ceremonies. More significantly, they were accompanied by captions on hotel walls, pamphlets (Eagleclaw and Heavybreast ca. 1920, McdAdams 1919) and “card copies” giving detailed descriptions of the depicted events.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Blackfeet war exploit robes were a living art form, brought to life by the constant verbal retelling of their depicted stories within the community. However, without the names of the protagonists and detailed accounts of their exciting adventures the few surviving early Blackfeet robes, although highly evocative as visual documents, are really skeletal records. Their mute testimony is in stark contrast to the later works which were commissioned along with vivid textual translations of the pictographs. The execution of **Big Nose**’s elk skin painting represents a pooling of native and non-native resources to produce a wonderful hybrid which combines Blackfeet pictography and oral history with European notation.

The following are Lorenzo Cooke’s verbatim notes, in italics, which describe the scenes on **Big Nose**’s elk skin painting. The contents of the present author are in square brackets. The reader is encouraged to refer to Figure 2 for the pictographic equivalents of Cooke’s notes. The numbers which key to his notes are inscribed on **Big Nose**’s original painting and are preserved on the illustration (Figure 2). (The numbers for Scenes 7 and 8 are not inscribed either on the original or the illustration. Their corresponding pictographs are found immediately to the left of Scene 6.)

**Events in the life of “Three Sons”** (otherwise known as “**Big Nose**”), last war chief of the Piegan Indians, as portrayed by him on an elk skin.

This elk skin was given by **Big Nose** to Captain L.W. Cooke (later Brigadier General, U.S.A.), 3rd U.S. Infantry, while Acting Indian Agent for the Blackfeet, Blood, and Piegan Indians, in 1893–1894. The following notes, interpretive of the various pictographs on the skin were made by Captain Cooke at the time from verbal descriptions given by **Big Nose** himself. At that time **Big Nose** was about seventy years old.

**Scene 1. (1870)**

Represents the capture of eight Pondera (Pen’d Orielle ?) Indians by the South Piegan, with whom they were at war. A large village of the Piegans were in camp in the Cypress Hills near old Fort Walsh, Northwest Territory. The Piegans succeeded in surrounding their foes and were about to kill them, when **Big Nose** interceded in their behalf, thus saving their lives and permitting them to return to the Flathead country from whence they came. It seems that at some previous time **Big Nose** had received a large silver medal from the U.S. Government at Washington, and was told at the time that he must not kill or permit his people to kill anyone, and that he and his people must make peace with all tribes as well as with the whites, hence his efforts to save the lives of this party. [**Big Nose** received a medal when he signed treaty as Bear Chief in 1865 (Schaeffer 1934–1954). It may be the same medal worn by **Big Nose** in his photograph (Figure 1). Maximilian noted that **Big Nose**’s father had “a silver medal on his breast” (Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1982:100).]

**Scene 2. (1867)**

Piegan camp near the Cypress Hills, Northwest Territory. Five Sioux Indians were discovered attempting to steal horses. **Big Nose** with a party of thirty Piegans attacked them, killing five of the party, with the loss of one Piegan. **Big Nose**
killed the first one. One Sioux escaped. (Apparently there must have been at least six Siouxs!)

Scene 3. (1860)
A fight with the Crows on the “swift stream” which empties into the Yellowstone just west of where Fort Keogh is now situated. The Piegan, led by Big Nose, numbered forty-two, and the Crows, twelve. The Piegan charged and the Crows ran into the brush. Their leader, however, stood his ground and was killed by Big Nose. Big Nose threw down his gun and closed in on the Crow, grappling with him. Another Piegian shot the Crow in the stomach; the Crow then drew a knife but before he could use it the man who had already wounded him, cut his arm causing him to drop the knife. Big Nose then stabbed the Crow to death. For this deed Big Nose was given the name of “Crow Chief”. [In this scene, and nine others, Big Nose wears protective war medicine in the form of a cased animal pelt decorated with ermine skins. It is probably the same medicine which came to Big Nose in a vision when he went on his first horse raid, noted above. This type of war medicine was particularly popular among the Blackfeet (Catlin 1876:37) and is frequently depicted in their war paintings. Warriors relied on the protective powers of this type of spirit helper when engaging in dangerous acts (Raczka 2003:130–138). This image is somewhat at odds with its translation, since Big Nose’s adversary holds a bow and arrow, not a knife as mentioned in the text.]

Scene 4. (1861)
Near White Sulphur Springs, Montana. A surprise by the Ponders. The Indian falling being the brother of Big Nose. The Piegans party numbered eleven, and the Pondera’s sixty. The former retreated to the brush. The brother recovered, and one Pondera was killed. [The number of depicted Pend’oreille should not be taken literally. The five in the painting represent the 60 in the verbal account. Pictographs are by nature abbreviated accounts for there was ample opportunity for Blackfeet warriors to recite their deeds in detail before the public.]

Scene 5 (1855)
Sweet Grass Hills, the east butte. At this time the Piegan and the Ponders were at peace, and sixty lodges of the Piegan and ten lodges of the Pondera’s were camped together. Late at night when soundly sleeping Big Nose heard a gun fired and then another. They all sprang to arms and when they emerged from their lodges they discovered that they were surrounded by about four hundred Siouxs. So close had been the fire that the Piegans horses corralled inside the circle of lodges were nearly all killed. Those not killed made their escape, except the sorrel pinto horse ridden by Big Nose. The Sioux by this time had possession of one half of the Piegan lodges. Big Nose on his pinto, which was wounded in the neck, and then exchanged for the yellow horse, held his people together in the other half of the village, fighting till morning. The yellow figure was a Sioux, wounded by a Pondera, and who ran off followed by Big Nose, who pursued and stabbed him to death. The Sioux then withdrew with a loss of sixteen killed; the Ponderas and Piegans losing eleven. [In contrast to the previous event, the Blackfeet and Pend’oreille are now at peace, probably because they were among those tribes who signed the Stevens treaty of 1855. Presumably this scene is divided into two sections because Big Nose performed two distinct deeds; keeping the enemy at bay while drawing fire and killing an enemy in close quarters.]

Scene 6. (1855)
In the Cypress Hills, Northwest Territory. Two hundred, lodges of Piegan were in camp. Two Sioux stole some of their horses. Big Nose and a few others gave chase. The horses of the Sioux gave out and they tried to escape on foot. Big Nose overtook the one shown in the scene, killing him with his knife. [This and the adjacent Scenes 3 and 5 may have been grouped together and made to look similar because they all record the stabbing of an enemy.]

Scene 7. (1860)
In the Judith Basin, Montana. Big Nose crawling up on a Pondera lodge under cover of night, taking the horse shown as picketed there. In the
meantime the owner opened fire shooting Big Nose through the coat. There were thirteen Piegans in the party and sixty lodges of Ponderas. The Piegans were a hundred miles from their own people. The horse shown was the only one taken, due to the early discovery of the raiders by the Ponderas. [Big Nose, knife in hand, is set to cut the halter. Clark (1982:396) noted that horse raiders equipped themselves with a lariat worn diagonally over the right shoulder. Big Nose carries a powder horn slung over one shoulder and probably a lariat over the other.]

Scene 8.

Medicine pipes captured in battle. [Unlike Blackfoot paintings, rows of pipes in paintings of Plains tribes to the east such as the Arikara, Sioux and Mandan usually signify times leading a successful war party.]

Scene 9. (1855)
Near the Cypress Hills, Northwest Territory. Eight Sioux attempt to steal horses from the Piegans camped there. About four hundred lodges of Bloods and Piegans. The Sioux stole six horses, were pursued, overtaken and all killed but one. Big Nose holding the horse and exchanging shots with the Sioux leader, whom he kills. [Lancaster (1966:129–30) was told that when the Blackfeet attacked an enemy on horseback they would often dismount, lead the horse, and fight on foot. “You could shoot straighter, be more agile, use the horse as a shield” (Lancaster 1966:129–30). Footprints leading to the Sioux chief suggest that Big Nose may have captured the enemy’s horned headdress.]

Scene 10. (1859)
Prickly Pear Valley, near where Helena, Montana, now stands. Big Nose and party, twenty-one in number, left their camp where the old Blackfoot Agency stood, on Badger Creek (15 miles from the new Agency at Browning, on the Great Northern Railroad). Reaching the Prickly Pear they found a camp of sixty lodges. Big Nose and another brave crawled up. Big Nose cut a fast horse loose from a lodge to which it was tied, his companion being killed in attempting a similar feat at another lodge. (It was the custom to secure their best horses—war ponies—by passing the lariat through the door of the lodge, and fasten it to a lodge pole inside). Six horses were obtained and the raiders all escaped except the one noted above. [The majority of Blackfoot depictions of this type of deed do not show the halter leading into the tipi, but rather to a picket pin anchored beside the tipi.]

Scene 11. (1847)

West Butte of the Sweet Grass Hills, Montana. Three hundred lodges of Piegans were in camp there. Fifty-three Crees made a night attack upon the Piegans, who were asleep when fired upon. Piegans fought but little during the night, but when daylight came a general charge was made upon the Crees. Big Nose mounted and charged among the Crees. His horse was shot in the head. After he was dismounted Big Nose killed one Cree with his gun, and two with his knife. All the Crees were finally killed, the Piegans losing thirteen killed and five wounded. Scene 11, lower down, also shows Big Nose after being dismounted, in combat with a Cree who hits Big Nose on the head with a flint lock gun, and a Piegans then shooting the Cree from the rear. [Big Nose wore his weasel-trimmed war shirt and leggings in the first segment of this scene. In the next, he wears an animal pelt war medicine, feathers in his hair and tied up forelock bound with red cloth. The caption for one of Shorty White Grass’ paintings displayed in a Glacier Park hotel probably describes the same battle: “On the right-hand side is shown a battle on the Marias River, on the west side of the Sweet Grass Hills, with a party of fifty Chippewas and Crees. Some four thousand Piegans, however, completely surrounded and cleaned this party up...In the upper right-hand corner one of the Chiefs of the enemy is entreating Chief Big Nose of the Piegan party to kill him with a club instead of with a gun, seeing that death was inevitable and fearing death by a gun” (Eaglecalfe and Heavybreast ca. 1920:Panel No. 26).]

Scene 12. (1881)

Judith Basin, Montana. Forty lodges of
Piegans were camped here. Three Sioux attempted to steal horses. They were discovered before they could carry out their design. All three were killed, by Under Bull, and Young Bear Chief. Big Nose taking, as shown in the drawing, the gun from one of them. He charged on the Indian whose gun would not fire. [The second segment of Scene 11 occurred 34 years after this event yet they are almost identical in subject matter, manner of depiction, and are connected by footsteps. The organizing principle here seems to be the same as in scenes 5 and 6: like deeds were grouped together and rendered similarly.]

Scene 13. (1875)

Cypress Hills, Northwest Territory. Two hundred lodges of Piegans were Camped here. Four Sioux were discovered in a thicket, were surrounded, and would have been killed but for Big Nose. He took to the brush but his squaw caught hold of him and tried to pull him away. He put her to one side and went into the thicket, crawling slowly toward the Sioux until he could see them behind a breastwork they had made in a circular opening in the thicket. Three were armed with Winchester rifles, two belts of cartridges, with their knives lying in front of them. The fourth had an old flint lock gun. Big Nose parleyed with the Sioux telling them the Great Father wanted all the Indians to make peace. He displayed the medal already referred to and a pipe he had with him asking them to smoke, and to come with him and he would feed them and send them safely home. They threatened to kill him, even poking their guns in his face, but he paid no attention to this; but continued to ask them to smoke. After making signs that they would not be hurt he could see that their leader was weakening. Big Nose then sprang inside the work and grabbed him; Big Nose squaw grabbing another and then they all came out, the Piegans not injuring them. They then turned the Sioux over to the Commanding Officer at Fort Walsh, N. W. T. He first sent word by an Indian, now called Jack the Ripper, to the Commanding Officer that they had the Sioux prisoners, but he would not believe it until Jack made oath of it.

The Commanding Officer then sent seven soldiers and one officer and four extra horses and got them. When the officer came he was still incredulous but when shown the pit which was deep and the protection afforded by the heavy fringe of thorn bush he was amazed at the conduct of Big Nose, and made notes and a sketch of the place. [The officer’s notes do not appear to have survived. Perhaps they were among the administrative files destroyed in the 1897 fire in the west block of the North West Mounted Police headquarters (Margaret Evans, personal communication, 2004). Big Nose’s medal, painted yellow, is barely visible above his pipe. Schaeffer (1934–1954:4–5) noted a somewhat altered account of the same event. “Again at Cypress Hills, four Assiniboine entrenched themselves in deep brush and could not be driven out. Thus Three Suns, bearing his pipe and accompanied by his wife, Beaver Woman, made their way into the thicket. There Three Suns induced Sun, an Assiniboine warrior, to drop his gun and accept the pipe offered him. Then the enemy were taken to camp, guarded by the Crazy Dog Society and escorted home by a U.S. Army detachment summoned by Three Suns.”]

Scene 14.

Four bows and quivers; tomahawk; powder horn and bullet pouch. These were “coup” and were taken by Big Nose in his different battles.

Scene 15. (1863)

North Cypress Hills, on the Elbow River, Northwest Territory. A large war party of Piegans were on the march, when they came upon four Sioux, in thick timber, who had dug a pit in which they were well protected. The Piegans surrounded and fought them all one day, losing four killed and seventeen wounded. The tree shown as leaning over the Sioux was a large one up which Big Nose finally climbed, his squaw trying to pull him back. Armed with a double barrel shot gun loaded with bullets he killed all four Sioux, although many times shot, being saved by the large limbs of the tree. [Schaeffer (1934–1954:4–5) noted a similar
event: “Another time some Crow raiders had entrenched themselves. Three Suns, despite the enemy fire, climbed a tree leaning over the trench, shot and killed one of the Crows. The Piegan then charged and overwhelmed the party.”]

Scene 16. (1854)
In the Snake River country. A party of one hundred and twenty-four Piegans encountered a lodge of Snake Indians, father, mother, and two grown sons. The gun shown was owned by one of the sons. The three men were killed, the woman being spared. The Piegans then returned to their own country without further incident of note, which took thirty-six days, as they were not mounted.

Scene 17. (1859)
On the Milk River, in Montana, where Chinook is now situated. The Piegan camp here consisted of Five hundred lodges. Nearly as many Assiniboines and Crows were camped about twenty miles away. Fighting began about midnight between the camps at about nine in the morning, ending in defeat of the Crows and Assiniboines who had seven killed and ten wounded, the Piegans losing one killed. The two horses shown were captured, one being wounded in the neck. The rider of the black horse when dismounted by the wounding of the horse, escaped into the brush. Big Nose ran up and the horse got away. Sitting Woman, a noted Crow Chief rode the black horse and disgraced himself by hiding in the brush. During the next charge Big Nose captured the other horse. The sorrel horse being very fat, broke down and was captured, his rider getting on behind another Indian thus making his escape. [The line between the horses was evidently made by mistake, then crossed out. The balance of power on the northern Plains shifted frequently in the 1800s. Weaker nations like the Crow and Assiniboine would form alliances to protect themselves against the stronger nations like the Blackfeet (Denig 1953:64; McGinnis 1974:204, 1990:106). Around the time of this event, the Crow were said to be “solicitous for peace with all tribes except the Blackfeet, with whom they wish to be at war as long as one of them remains” (Kurz 1937:171).]

Scene 18. (1856)
At a Point where Great Falls, Montana, now stands on the Missouri River where it comes out of the mountains. A war party traveling at the time discovered a band of elk and thought to kill some meat. The elk ran into a large clump of timber, Big Nose following. While trying to sneak up on the elk, a bear surprised him by charging. The bear was almost upon him when the fatal shot was fired. [Occasionally the killing of grizzlies is represented on war exploits paintings of the Blackfeet. Meriwether Lewis noted in 1804–1806 that when the Indians of the northern Plains went out against the grizzlies they painted themselves and performed rituals in the same way as when they prepared to go against the enemy (DeVoto 1963:95, see also 388 and 424).]

Scene 19. (1845)
On the Missouri River, south of where Helena, Montana, now stands. A war party of Piegans going into the Snake country, twelve in number. Traveling along they saw elk in the edge of the timber. Big Nose being a good shot went after them to get some meat. The brush was thick, and the bear was almost upon Big Nose when it stopped. He shot the bear, being so close the animal was powder burned.

Scene 20.
Scalps taken by Big Nose. Some, however, were killed by others,—the first to take has the honor. [Schultz learned that four men could be credited with war honors for taking parts of a single enemy scalp (Schultz and Donaldson 1930:119–120). Most Blackfeet war exploit robes display groupings of scalps depicted either as comb-like forms, fringed rectangles and circles and, more rarely, a highly coveted braided and decorated scalp lock or topknot cut from the crown of the head.]

Scene 21.
Four Indians killed not shown in other scenes, viz—two Sioux, one Snake, and one Pondera.
Battles. Big Nose had been in thirty-six battles, not all shown. He had killed eleven (?) Indians in all, being himself wounded nine times—six by gun shot, and three times struck over the head with a gun. [I know of only two other Blackfeet painted hides that bear sets of strokes tallying the number of times on the war path, one painted in 1892 and the other in 1909. Although the number of enemies killed by Big Nose given here is 11, the total number mentioned in Cooke’s transcription comes to 17. Big Nose performed several exploits not recorded on his painting. One of the pictographic events painted on Bear Chief’s tipi shows Big Nose going after a Cree who took shelter in some Saskatoon bushes (Brownstone 2005a). Another time, near St. Mary Lake in 1865, Big Nose protected Hugh Munroe’s family from an Assiniboine war party, gathering 80 men to drive out the enemy (Jackson 2000:207). Schaeffer (1934–1954) briefly noted several additional war events of Big Nose, including the time in the Cypress Hills when he charged on his horse through 50 Crees to force their retreat.]

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NOTES

1. Charles Revais, born in 1874, was the son of Beaver Woman who later married Big Nose.

2. Other surviving artifacts belonging to Big Nose include his moccasins, “the last pair he wore.” (#139 Grinnell papers, Southwest Museum) and his “[war] medicine, ……… to be tied to the scalp lock, was the property of Three Sun’s grandfather, Sun Old man, and handed down from father to son. It should have gone to the son of Three Suns, Appekunny, but he died before his father (#142 Grinnell papers, Southwest Museum).” Both items were collected by George Bird Grinnell from Mrs. Three Suns in 1898 and are held in Peabody Yale Museum, Catalog Numbers 1993 and 1990 respectively.

3. Catalog Numbers Numbers HK461, HK460, HK457 and HD641/2.


5. Royal Ontario Museum Catalog Number HK459, American Museum of Natural History Catalog Number, 50/6055, 50/5916, Burke Museum Catalog Number 2-2595, ex. Glenbow Museum Catalog Number AF 815.


7. The painting by Sarcee Chief Bulls Head at the Royal Ontario Museum, Catalog Number HK459, also gives the dates of events.

8. Canon Middeton, missionary on the Blood Reserve, supervised the painting of the Prince of Wales Hotel panels and typed the accompanying text translation. These were sent to the United States for printing. A number of the card copies are preserved in The Fort Museum, Fort McLeod. See File FMP018.141.1.

9. Beaver Woman was a very noted Nato or holy Sundance woman. She was Big Nose’s “sits-beside-him” wife and died of extreme old age a few years after her husband passed away (Schaeffer 1934–1954).

