A New Perspective on the Blackfoot

Skilful sleuthing of the entries on a hand-written field list and a collection of Blackfoot artifacts acquired in the early years of the ROM has revealed new facts about Blackfoot culture.

The Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology was founded in 1912, during an era that was greatly interested in antiquity and collecting. Extensive archaeological activity among the ruins of past civilizations, increasing travel to the far reaches of the Orient, and vast changes occurring within tribal cultures around the world made the accumulation of artifacts a top priority for the Museum. About eighteen years passed before the Museum developed a system for numbering and cataloguing its new collections; as a result, valuable information that accompanied early acquisitions may have been omitted from the Museum's catalogue books. Today, the importance of correlating artifact and documentation gives rise to what may be loosely termed “in-house” field work. One such project began as I was sifting through the archival files of the Ethnology Department and found an old handwritten list with the heading, “Explanations and Legends of the Indian curios according to the Numbers attached to each curio.” As I read through the list, one of the descriptions in particular struck a chord in my memory:

Old gaming wheel. A very popular and pernicious game. The Indians would stake hides, dogs, horses, food, clothes, weapons, tepees and even their wives on the results of the game. Two men stood together and another two facing them some distance from them. One would roll the wheel on the ground towards an obstacle. The two, each, had a little wooden dart which they would try to throw so as to pass in, or under the fallen wheel. When the wheel came to rest the dart best situated in relation to certain beads or marks had the count. Ten points made the game. Two could play the game. They would follow the wheel and throw their darts, trying to make highest count.

The description brought to mind a unique gaming wheel that I previously had identified with the help of a Paul Kane painting and subsequently placed in the collection storage area. On a hunch, I went to the object and noted a sticker bearing the number 156 and the abbreviation VIC. The number was the same as that of the gaming wheel on the old list! At that point I surmised that most of the items on the list had been dispersed among the two thousand other artifacts in the Plains Indian collection. The problem was now to separate those items from the rest of the collection.

Aaron Brownstone

Previous page: Gaming wheel and Paul Kane, Game of Al-kol-lock, ca. 1850, oil on canvas, 87.5 x 59 cm
Above: Necklace
Above right: One of a pair of matching saddlebag facings
Right: Farleche medicine bag

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his tribal territory as head scout in the manhunt for the famous renegade Charcoal.

Many of the artifacts illustrate the radical changes that took place in Blackfoot culture, such as the transformation of sacred traditions into social ones. The collector had observed women wearing a particular style of headdress at dances and marriages. In an earlier time this headdress would have been reserved for the rituals of the men's Horns Society.

The collection as a whole has an interest that extends beyond the individual artifacts. From a more general perspective it is interesting to note that among the seventy names of people mentioned in the field list, twenty-nine were chiefs and twelve were otherwise important people. The significance of this may be partly explained by contemporary political and economic conditions.

Before 1875 the Blackfoot were a nomadic people whose considerable wealth was gained through hunting buffalo and raiding other tribes surrounding their territory. Correspondingly, their political organization was a loose configuration based on opportunity and individual entrepreneurship. When our artifacts were collected about the turn of the century, the Blackfoot were settled on their reserves. The political structure was now much more centralized, and the main source of economic gain was contact with the new European culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that nearly all the leaders in the area had made exchanges with the collector. In some instances it was evident that items were given to the collector with the indication that they formerly belonged to a chief, now deceased, who was thus brought posthumously into the transaction.

I then searched the archives of the missionaries on the Blood reserve and other documents such as newspapers, diaries, and scholarly publications to find out how the individual chiefs noted on the collection list had dealt with the two cultures. The following is the type of story that emerges.

Chief Blackfoot Old Woman or Ermine Horses was co-head of the Black Elk band of the Blood Tribe. In the pre-reserve years he and Crop-Eared Wolf became wealthy and powerful as leaders of horse raiding parties. In the early reservation years Blackfoot Old Woman gave support to the government farming program. In 1881 he declared his cooperation with the Methodist educational program, and then in 1883 he asked the Anglican mission to build a school in his camp. Throughout the 1880s he allowed both competing missionaries to hold services in his lodge. In 1888 he made political gains by paying for the transfer of the rituals, power, and objects of the medicine pipe bundle belonging to Red Crow, head chief of the Blood tribe. In the same year, Blackfoot Old Woman made a request of the Methodist missionary for a badge like the one given to Red Crow so that “the white man might recognize his position”. In 1894 Blackfoot Old Woman and Crop-Eared Wolf, along with two others were the first Blood People to be allowed to trade their horses for cattle thereby furthering the livelihood of their people. In 1900 Crop-Eared Wolf, motivated in the same way as Blackfoot Old Woman had been twelve years earlier, paid for the transfer of power of another medicine pipe, the prestigious Long Time Pipe. Soon after he and Blackfoot Old Woman became co-heads of the Blood Tribe. (Ironically, neither missionary made any conversions during this period.)

This ability to play one culture against another was a technique of survival. It was accompanied by a similar facility for manipulating new materials, forms, and ideas in the material culture of the Blackfoot.

According to a contemporary issue of Acta Victoriana the Union Literary Society of Victoria College purchased the Blackfoot collection from a former professor, E. Odum, in 1901. It is still not certain if he was the original collector. In the same year Charles Trick Currely, then in his graduate years, presented a lecture on the collection and was asked to catalogue the artifacts. When the collection was transferred to the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology twelve years later it was under the care of Currely, who by that time had become the Museum's first director. This collection and the documentation, which passed into the Museum’s possession, proved to be valuable sources of insight into Blackfoot culture.

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The "long oval shaped box for carrying or storing hat" is now known to be a "Round Parleche Medicine bag = Ato-sis-tow-pise from Eagle Head. In it would be kept the medicine pipe, sweet grass, beaver seed tobacco, small rattle and whistle—all sacred to the sun."

The traditional form of Plains Indian chair is called a backrest. Initially I was puzzled by the collector’s identification of a group of backrest decorative panels as "travois ornaments". Later, when I discovered a photograph showing the traditional manner of packing backrests onto travois, I understood why he made this attribution. Since neither backrests nor travois were in ordinary use at that time, what the collector had observed was probably a re-enactment of former days, a phenomenon popular at the turn of the century in such events as the Calgary Stampede and as a subject for picture postcards made to attract homesteaders to the West.

Three paired items were previously catalogued as “two wide panels probably used as aprons”. When these items were placed alongside a saddlebag from the collection, I realized that they were the saddlebag facings described on the old list. The facings share a style of beadwork that is characteristic of the early reserve years. They show a wonderful balance between the traditional geometric style of the Blackfoot and the curvilinear, floral forms popular in Victorian times.

The Eagle-Feather Shield that belonged to a man called Green Grass was believed to be of a “protective nature and aided the owner in quickness of motion”. It is perhaps indicative of the effect of European culture that the same man offered to go to South Africa as a scout during the Boer War and “only asked $15.00 a day”. I believe the collector sarcastically used the qualifier “only” since three years earlier Green Grass was paid fifty cents a day in
A note added to the list—"From folder: 'Victoria College' Odlum Coll'n?"— reminded me of a section in the catalogue book, compiled around 1930, titled, "Victoria College Collection—Blackfoot, mostly Bloods". This heading, along with some rough similarities between the catalogue entries and the old list, raised the possibility that the “missing” collection had been recorded in the catalogue. To verify this, I located artifacts bearing the same registration numbers as those entered in this section of the catalogue. As I brought the artifacts out of storage it became apparent that they were indeed from the collection described on the old document. Furthermore, each object had been inscribed with the letters VIC, thus enabling the entire collection to be reassembled.

I then attempted to correlate each artifact with its documentation on the old list. The following results were achieved: thirty artifacts have retained their original numbers and, like the gaming wheel, have been directly matched with their numeric counterpart on the list. A further forty-eight items were identified through a process of elimination. The remainder were divided into groups of similar items, and each group was associated with a set of possible attributions. My final task was to make the new-found information available through the current catalogue system. Here are some examples of how the catalogue has been improved.

We now know the mythological-religious significance of a rattle that had been previously catalogued simply as “rattle, red and yellow bulb part, hide covered, handle with beaded band attached”. The old field list adds:

The red and yellow rattle is on a small scale supposed to represent a home of the Su Ye Tuppá or Underwater people. In early times one of the Suyetuppá was helped by a man who afterwards needed help when pursued by his enemies. He went under the water (and) was received by the very Suyetuppá he had helped. He told his guest to return to earth, make a drum red and yellow, then make a red and yellow rattle to be used as a drum stick.

The artifact formerly recorded as “long bag” has become:

Fire bag = Isti or Isiši from Chief Bull Horn. Before the time of “Flint and Steel” and Lucifer’s the Indians made fire by rubbing wood against dry wood. This took time and was difficult. To avoid trouble they used to carry fire in horns or bags lined with wet, rotten wood or moss. In the center was a bit of punk slowly burning. This would readily start a fire. The punk is a fungus from the birch.

The item previously described as a “string of nuts and glass beads, metal spirals and feathers depending from end” now gives a glimpse into the highly developed practice of botanical medicine among the Blackfoot: “a necklace of Golden Rod (Solidago) warts used as medicine. The warts are chewed and the juice is spit upon the sore.” An “ornament” in the old catalogue is known in more elaborate terms as:

Scalp lock = ‘San-otum-mots-sinn-oku-yi-kin-sis’ from Crazy Jack or Hearing Afar Off. These scalp-locks were not always real scalps—but for various reasons might be a portion of hair cut off an Indian of another tribe in exchange for a similar tuft or lock.