Treasures of the Bloods

Swept up in curiosity about the North American Native peoples, a pinched-looking middle-aged English woman set out for adventure in Alberta in 1890, collecting important artifacts we still treasure today.

by Arni Brownstone

Carefully avoiding “stuffy” Pullman in favour of immigrant class, the two prim English-women were searching for adventure as their train rattled across the Canadian prairies in the summer of 1890. Frances Baynes Kirby, the 42-year-old widow of an Anglican clergyman, conceived of the trip after seeing a Buffalo Bill show in the “old country,” a show that left her feeling “tremendously curious about Western Indians.” She persuaded 22-year-old Violet Winifred Wood, the daughter of another English clergyman, to accompany her. When they
In 1877, when they signed Treaty Seven, the Blood Indians surrendered most of their land to the Dominion of Canada and began their difficult adjustment from a nomadic life to one on the reserve. All this coincided with the demise of the buffalo, and Blackfoot life changed dramatically. The nomadic days were still alive to many Blackfoot, and nowhere were those days more deeply cherished than in the mind of White Calf.

Head of the Marrows band, White Calf was among the treaty’s signatories, along with co-head chief Red Crow. By 1883, when the older Blood leaders had passed on, the Bloods considered White Calf and Red Crow as two of the most influential men on the reserve.

Even after signing the treaty, there were several incidents that led the Bloods to a state of war alert and, according to ancient custom, Red Crow would have to step aside for White Calf, who was the war chief. Most notably, in 1883, when the older Blood leaders had passed on, the Bloods considered White Calf and Red Crow as two of the most influential men on the reserve.

In 1890, Frances's travelling photograph, White Calf, the last Blood war chief, was on exhibit in the Division of Anthropology at the Canadian Historical Exhibition, 1899. White Calf's saddle is near the center, his knife sheath toward the left corner.\[83x357\] Above: Detail (altered) of Tefft Collection catalogue attributed to Jesse J. Complanter, Mohawk illustrator, 1904. Middle: Installation photograph of the Indian section of the Canadian Historical Exhibition, 1899. White Calf's saddle is near the center, his knife sheath toward the left corner. Right: Lizzie Davis wearing regalia collected by Frances from the Bloods.
Frances returned to England around August 15, perhaps with some of her collection of Indian artifacts already in hand. Some years after being back in England, Frances met John Ojijatekha (the Burning Flower) Brant-Sero, a Mohawk Indian from the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve in Ontario. By then, Frances was 48, some 15 years older than Ojijatekha. Photographs show her to have a tight, pinched appearance, while his open, generous features made him younger than Ojijatekha. Photographs also show that his daughter, Frances, had a tight, pinched appearance, while his open, generous features made him younger than Ojijatekha. Photographs also show that his daughter, Frances, had a tight, pinched appearance, while his open, generous features made him younger than Ojijatekha.

On June 29, 1896, the unlikely pair were married. That same month, Frances wrote to Boyle, offering to sell their collection of Blackfoot artifacts. The list of some 60 artifacts collected by Frances was titled: “OJIIJATEKHA Collection of RELIC Review of the Blackfoot and Blood Indians in the Canadian North West. Work in Beads and Skin.” At the end of the list is a note: “The above collection was gathered by Mrs. Brant-Sero from the Indians themselves during two visits to the Northwest, afterwards taking them to England. The collection is valued at £500. Pinder Lodge, Hamilton, Ont., Jan. 6/98.”

Boyle turned down the offer, noting that, “the collection is certainly a very good one . . . but I am fully assured that a similar, or even superior one may be made for less than half the price asked.”

In February 1900, Ojijatekha wrote to Boyle of his plan to go to Chicago to make a decent living, and asked him to explain to Frances that it was a question of business, not a matter of running away. “It is my intention to leave Canada for the States in search of a market for my brains and talent,” he wrote. In the same month, Frances also wrote Boyle, expressing her concern over her husband’s departure, noting that he was “as queer as Dick’s hatband that went round nine times and would not tie.” Whatever his wife’s opinion, Ojijatekha became something of a celebrity during his four-month stay in Chicago. Although he worked as a “special” reporter with the Evening Post and received offers to give a lecture series at the Field Museum, Ojijatekha was still unable to make ends meet.

At the Field Museum of Chicago, Stephen C. Simms, as assistant curator of Ethnology and later the museum’s director, suggested that Franz Boas, curator of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, might be interested in hiring Ojijatekha as a fieldworker among the Iroquois. Although Ojijatekha sent Boas a lengthy proposal probably in 1900, he noted that certain doors might be closed to him. “My experience and sympathy with my own people make my fitness for field work of some value, however, there does not appear to be any demands for educated Indians in the higher walks.”

Although Boas seemed genuinely interested in Ojijatekha’s offer, he could see no immediate opportunity for the American Museum of Natural History to embark on a field study of the Iroquois. Since there is nothing to connect him directly with the sale of Frances’s collection to that institution in 1910, it seems likely that what Ojijatekha did do was put Simms in touch with Frances. On February 6, 1900, she wrote to Boyle that Roddy appeared to be interested in acquiring the collection. Just six weeks later, the secretary of the Wentworth Historical Society noted that Frances was “compelled to sell her collection of Indian curios & said to be very valuable to get money to take her to England.” The Field Museum had turned down the offer of the collection, likely because they already held two significant collections from the Bloods. So most probably Frances sold her collection to Roddy. Sometime between 1900 and 1904, Roddy appears to have lost interest in the collection and it was purchased by the Glenbow Archives in 1941.
have then sold Frances’s material to a major American collector, Ezusta Tefft, since in 1904 Tefft produced an elegant handmade catalogue of his collection, which included artifacts first acquired by Frances. White Calf’s artifacts were illustrated with annotations.

Then, in 1910, Tefft sold his collection to New York’s American Museum of Natural History. Among the 1300 Indian objects were some 30 Blood and Blackfoot artifacts, which, according to the documentation, were originally collected by “Mrs. Brant-Sero.” Outside of the AMNH collection, only a single additional object from Frances’s original 60-piece collection has been located: a pair of woman’s beaded leggings, deposited by Tefft in the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Some 30 items on Boyle’s original list have yet to be located. A number of the missing artifacts are among those discernible in the several installation photographs of the Canadian Historical Exhibition, Indian section, held in 1899 at Victoria University in Toronto.

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horseback to shock the enemy into disarray. As they attacked, they constantly wove their bodies from side to side, or bent low over the horse’s neck to make a difficult target. Apparently, riding bareback allowed them to perform these manoeuvres with greater dexterity, and a number of accounts describe Plains Indians discarding their saddles before the charge. A variety of ceremonies called for both horse and rider to dress in full regalia: sham battles, mounted parades, the Riding Big Dance performed immediately before striking out on a scalp raid, or during the annual Sun Dance.

White Calf’s club is another fascinating piece in the Brant-Sero collection. Performing brave deeds was a primary means for Blackfoot men to gain social esteem, and greater bravery was associated with hand-to-hand combat than with the use of weapons that could kill efficiently from a distance. In the late 19th century, Blackfoot warriors used elliptical or bi-conical stone-headed clubs with long shafts, often called “coup sticks” because they could be used to strike a powerful blow. A longer shaft, it seems, was used for fighting on horseback. In a running battle, a warrior used his club to knock the enemy from his mount. Although many Blackfoot war exploits have been recorded in both words and pictographs, references to clubs are few and far between.

One of the few accounts was given by Shorty White Grass, an important Blackfoot (Piegans) warrior and ceremonialist who died on his reserve in Montana in 1908 at the age of 86. He recalled that an enemy Chief, seeing that death was inevitable and fearing death by a gun, entreated Big Nose, a Blackfoot, to kill him with a club instead. Despite the paucity of written accounts, museums contain many serviceable stone-headed clubs from the northern plains. Most have little decoration, while others, like the one attributed to White Calf, are ornate.

Clubs were likely used as weapons only on scalp raids and in pageants associated with war. It may be that towards the close of tribal warfare, clubs came to be regarded more and more as insignia of rank, to be carried on ceremonial occasions, particularly in dances. Today, traditional powwow dancers often carry a decorative club, which they raise when the drum gives an accented beat or “shot.”

The third White Calf artifact is described in the Canadian Historical Exhibition catalogue as a “double edged scalping knife.” The Blackfoot called this type of knife a “stabbber” or “beaver tail knife.” It was favoured in hand-to-hand fighting. In the 1940s, elderly Blackfoot Indians explained to anthropologist John Ewers that the knife was used as a shock weapon. The warrior grasped the handle with the blade protruding from the heel of his fist and used either a powerful downward chopping motion to penetrate his opponent above the clavicle, or a sideways slash into the stomach or between the ribs. The elders described how they used such knives in their youth to scalp the enemy by grasping his hair with the right hand and, using the right hand to cut around his crown, and jerking off the hair with the skin attached, removing a section of scalp about 7.6 cm (3 inches) in diameter.

On horse raids, knives were indispensable. The most prized horses were war horses, or buffalo runners, which were kept securely tethered outside the tipi near the sleeping owner’s bed. The raider would cut the halter at just the right length to quietly lead the horse away. White Calf’s sheath, with its characteristic lozenge-shaped tab, is a uniquely Blackfoot design. Typically, the sheath has two beaded sections separated by a length of hide, often decorated only with zigzag lines. Based on comparison with other items having similar beadwork styles, it is unlikely that White Calf’s saddle, club, and sheath were made before 1875—five years after the last major scalp raid mounted by the Bloods.

Of all the documentation of the saddle and club, only on Teft’s list is the term “war” used to describe them. What we know about war practices at the time, however, suggests that any association of these artifacts with war was largely ceremonial. Long after the fighting days, war ceremonials continued, and it is entirely possible that Frances observed White Calf in a mounted parade or sham battle decked out with his club, saddle, and knife.

As Frances’s collection changed hands, White Calf’s name became increasingly prominent on the collection lists. His name is absent from the original list provided to Ojijatekha’s mentor Boyle when he and Frances first attempted to sell the collection. Then, in the Historical Exhibition catalogue there is a single entry: “Blood Indians Pony Saddle (Blood Reserve). Belonged to Chief White Calf.” By the time the items got to the AMNH, the accession list has the notation “obtained from White Calf . . . Blood Reserve” recorded for all three items.

No doubt many Indian artifacts have been falsely associated with famous chiefs in order to increase their monetary value or for vanity’s sake. Although White Calf was undeniably important among his people, he did not achieve the kind of widespread notoriety that would have made his name particularly marketable. While we cannot be absolutely certain that the three artifacts did belong to White Calf, their existing documentation is cause to acknowledge this important, if overlooked, Blood tribal leader.

Of course, the collectors of White Calf’s possessions were, themselves, intriguing characters. Until the end Ojijatekha remained a controversial, larger-than-life figure. He travelled extensively throughout Europe performing in wild west shows, not unlike the one that first inspired Frances’s collection changed hands, White Calf’s possessions were, themselves, intriguing characters. Until the end Ojijatekha remained a controversial, larger-than-life figure. He travelled extensively throughout Europe performing in wild west shows, not unlike the one that first inspired Frances to cross the Canadian Prairies. On March 18, 1914, Ojijatekha sent to Boyle’s successor his translation of an important speech given in 1774 by the Mohawk Chief Logan. Two months later, the Provincial Museum received notice of Ojijatekha’s death. Condolences were sent to Frances at the same address as Ojijatekha’s last correspondence, indicating that the couple may have been together at the end. Whatever their quirks, the couple’s interest in Western Indians has helped preserve a piece of history that might otherwise have been lost to antiquity.