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and the
GREATER
YELLOWSTONE
MAGAZINE

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As a child I learned that every place had a story and within those stories was an explanation of the Blackfeet relationship to their landscape. Traveling with my grandmother was a nonstop history lesson. She told whoever was in the car, the story of each hill, bluff, creek, and river. Every place in Montana had a history of human interaction. Some stories were of places the Blackfeet used for collecting plant medicines or food, some were places for hunting, some were places of triumphant battle scenes or, worse, places of massacres and death; and yet others were places of prayer and ritual. Sometimes her stories of one place led her to tell stories of a distant place. Together, her stories amounted to a kind of journal that told the history of the northern Great Plains. There was never a place in our travels in Montana without a story.

I learned from my grandmother’s stories that the Blackfeet did not have our modern American concept of wilderness – as a place “untrammeled by man.”

The ancient Blackfeet, of whom my grandmother spoke, used and understood their landscape in two ways: through its utilitarian purposes and through its role in religion.

In ancient times, the Blackfeet had a distinct territory that they called their own, which they used in a multiplicity of ways. The Blackfeet used some places continuously, such as where they lived or gathered resources, or, occasionally, for seasonal activities. Near the edges of their territory, the Blackfeet had what ecologists call buffer zones or rarely used areas positioned between human territories. The Blackfeet managed their landscape, through fire or manipulation, or they intentionally left it natural.

Outside of their territory, the Blackfeet traveled to distant places to collect resources they could not find within their own territory and to trade with other Native groups. In a story collected in 1910, a Blackfeet man named Kainaikoan told of his ancestors’ experiences on the landscape. He spoke of how the Blackfeet split their year into two seasons, winter and summer. His ancestors’ band lived in a sheltered river valley throughout the winter, which usually lasted six months. Then, during the summer, they moved as many as fifteen times to hunt for food and hides, gather berries and roots, collect medicines and important natural resources, and to conduct their annual religious rituals. The Blackfeet used each place they went to for a specific purpose.

Historically, the Blackfeet divided themselves first into tribes – the Siksika, the Kainai, the Apsotahi Pikuni, and the Amskapi Pikuni. Each tribe then further divided itself into multiple family units called bands. Each tribe had between twenty to twenty-five bands. Combined, the four tribes had from eighty to one hundred different bands.

Imagine the landscape of the northern Great Plains, with these one hundred bands living separately from each other and moving from place to place. If each band moved fifteen times during the year, as Kainaikoan reported, the bands of the Blackfeet would have used as many as 1,500 different places in a year. It is no wonder that my grandmother had a story for every place on the landscape.
There were places on the landscape, though, that the Blackfeet never set foot on. They viewed much of their land as a Holy Land where supernatural entities lived and humans set aside for sacred use. These Natives of the prairie believed that supernatural entities lived in sacred places on the landscape, and felt that humans should not disturb them, therefore allowing the spirits privacy. The Blackfeet understood that boundaries between humans and supernaturals were necessary, similar to the buffer zones between human groups. It was from within these buffer areas, near, but not inside, a sacred place, that the Blackfeet went to pray or perform rituals. They also went near, but not into, sacred places to gather plants, animals or other natural elements to use within their ceremonies. Even though the Blackfeet left the sacred places of supernatural entities alone, they still recognized their places on the landscape as “used places,” even if humans did not use them.

The Blackfeet also believed that some sacred places were the creation of humans and not the creation of supernatural beings. These places were usually connected to human suffering or the supernatural intervention in the lives of the Blackfeet. Sometimes, they had a similar prohibition against human presence. Some battle sites or burial places were viewed as sacred, and they did not frequent them. Yet the Blackfeet sometimes created shrines at these places and left offerings or prayers there. Each of these places had a story of its creation on the landscape.

The Blackfeet built various temporary structures for prayer or ceremonies, such as an O’kán or Medicine lodge (also known as the Sundance), or sweat lodges. Once the Blackfeet had used these edifices, they were left alone in the natural elements to decay. They also built stone effigies as memorials to leaders who had died. The Blackfeet did not often return to these places or structures on the landscape until a significant amount of time had passed. Special places, which were left alone, free of a permanent human presence, was not a new concept to the Blackfeet. However, those places were usually connected to their religious belief system.

Over the millennia, the Blackfeet territory filled with places and stories. They valued every place in their landscape for its utility or sacredness. Each story of these places became part of a mnemonic historic text that people learned to recount. My grandmother learned this narrative from her grandmothers as a child.

I learned as a child that there were no empty spaces or unused places on the Blackfeet landscape. I learned that the Blackfeet appreciated their land, not for its intrinsic value, but for a longer deeper connection, where humans shared a world with the supernatural.