

PORTRAITS OF CHANGE

By Paul M. Raczka

The last buffalo hunt had long been over by 1919 when Winold Reiss first came among the Blackfoot people. The old time life of a warrior had disappeared. Granted, a few young men had come back from the "Great War" with stories of coups and adventures. But the places they talked about were not Blackfoot country, or Crow country or Cree country, and there were no stories of charging horses and flowing war bonnets. Change had come to the people, and it was a drastic change.

The people of the buffalo days were different. Their faces were etched by the wind, sun, and hunger. Their souls were shaped through the hunt, war raids, and day to day tragedies of life. And they were disappearing.

For Reiss, the romantic, that short period of ultimate Plains Indian culture, the horse and buffalo days, had to be preserved. The character lined in those faces, and the artistic accomplishments reflected in their clothing were a testament to a life that would never exist again. Each year fewer people remained. Each year the feathered bonnets, weaseltail shirts, shields, and lances, were sold to museums and collectors, or buried with their owners. Time was not on his side.

With this driving force behind him, he began to seek out those that remained. He sought out the warriors and Holy Men, the women and Holy Women, who lived during the peak of that culture. And he painted them. The epitome of Blackfoot society came wearing their finest. They came wearing their Medicine shirts and headdresses, their Holy necklaces and robes. They came so future generations could see what once was. For they, like the rest of America, felt Blackfoot culture would soon disappear.

Today, some 80 years later, we know that Blackfoot culture has not disappeared. Changed, certainly, but disappeared...definitely not.

So what, exactly, has Reiss left us besides great works of art? He left us with faces to put with the stories and oral history of the Blackfoot people. The doctoring stories about Gets-Wood-At-Night become more real, more personal, when we see the power in his ancient face. The war legends of Mountain Chief come alive, even in his 80-year-old face.

The C.M. Russell Museum has one of the finest collections of Winold Reiss portraits in the country. And perhaps there is no place more fitting for them to

be than in the heart of Blackfoot country. It was here life etched those faces, and it is here the stories are still alive.

Through the years I have heard many of those stories from relatives of those painted, and in some cases from the few that still survived. They were stories of the "old" days of glory, and the days of transition. Some of the stories were oral and known only to a few, others had been written in the books of Montana history. Many people, Blackfoot as well as non-Native, have over the years asked me to put those stories together with the faces. These are just a few of the many.

I've used a few stories from published material instead of the sources I had heard them from, because they are "as told to." They were either direct experiences, or told by the actual person to another party. Their flavor and immediacy come through in the writing. For a few individuals we know only a little, but I feel even this helps put the "humanity" into the portrait. There are still many, many stories out there. Hopefully this article will create enough interest to start writing them down for the future generations of Montanans.

GETS-WOOD-AT-NIGHT

Gets-Wood-At-Night was a survivor of the buffalo days. In his later years on the Blackfoot-Blood Reserve in Canada, he became well known as an "Indian Doctor." There are many stories of his healing powers still circulating on the Blood Reserve, but we are fortunate to have an account written by one of his patients.

Joe Beebe, a Blood Indian with a "modern" outlook on life, opted for traditional Native doctoring when his life was endangered. The encounter, written in his own words, shows us the dichotomy of a culture in change, and the conflicting values faced by the young generation.

"The most peculiar thing I ever witnessed in the way of Indian witchery was when an old Medicine-man used the Weasel Test on a very sick man to find out if he was going to die or pull through. The sick man was near the end. He had quit eating for two days and could not turn in bed without the help of his wife. The official doctor of the Reserve said there was no hope, and the patient should not live many days longer.

"This man was lying on his bed, his head was on high pillows and his legs straight out under covers. The Medicine-man turned over the bed covers enough to expose the whole of the left leg of the patient, and he sang a very weird song. Then, out of his medicine bag he took a skin of a small weasel, and a twisted buckskin cord, about two feet in length, heavily daubed in red earth.

"The Medicine-man placed the pelt lengthwise on the exposed lap of the sick man; the head of the pelt rested on the man's knee. Then, taking the buckskin cord, he bound the weasel skin securely to the man's leg, tight enough, but not uncomfortable. He tipped the ends of two fingers in a small bag of red earth and made imprints, tracks like the weasel makes, from the weasel's head on the patient's knee; down his leg to his foot, about six inches apart. Putting back the covers on the leg, he faced the patient and said: 'This is going to decide if that White Man's words are going to be so, or not. If you are to be on your feet again, the weasel ought to free itself from the binding and follow it's tracks; if not, it is too bad. Now just lay still; I will go in the other room and have a smoke.'

"In about a half hour, the Medicine-man came back in to take his seat at the left of the patient. It was a very trying moment for the sick man. The covers were removed from the leg, and by some strange phenomenon the lifeless thing was out of its binding and was well past the patient's foot, as if it had crawled there, to the utter surprise of the patient and his wife. The old Indian picked up his weasel and undid the cord, which was still securely tied. Putting back his things in his bag, the Indian Doctor said, 'You are not going to die just yet; you will be up on your feet again in just four days.' And very true.

"This happened about fifteen years ago. The very sick man the white Doctor had no hope for is still alive, and he happens to be your humble servant, Red-Tail-Feathers (Joe Beebe).

"Now I am a christian and do not believe in superstitions, whatever. But this unaccountable thing we saw, I and my wife, is still a puzzle to us. However, seeing is believing, they say.

"This Medicine-man's name was Getting-Wood-at-Night. He died last winter (c. 1930s)." ("The Blood People," pp 172, 173)

EAGLE CHILD, MOUNTAIN CHIEF, AND BEAR MEDICINE

Eagle Child (b. 1861) and Bear Medicine (b. 1864) were younger than Mountain Chief (b. 1852), but they both managed to catch the end of the buffalo days. Eagle Child was born to Big Plume and Kills-At-Night-Woman. Bear Medicine's parents were Middle Calf and Rolling-A-Baby-Woman. Both had been buffalo

hunters and warriors, and in later life ceremonialists and owners of numerous Medicine Bundles.

Of Mountain Chief we know much more. He has taken his place in history as a leader of the Blackfoot-Peigan People and a warrior renown in Montana history. His father was also known as Mountain Chief, and was a signer of the 1855 Treaty with the United States. His mother was Charging-Across-Quartering-Woman.

As a young man, he went through the ceremonies and transfers of numerous Medicine Bundles. Interestingly enough, these were mostly war Medicines like shields, spears, weaseltail shirts, headdresses, war bridles (Horse Medicine), and Cross-Belts of Fisher and Otter.

Chief of the Fast Buffalo Band of the South Peigans, he was a warrior to be reckoned with. In his later years General Hugh Scott presented his complete uniform to Mountain Chief, as a token of his respect for this leader. Throughout his life many ethnographers and historians sought out Mountain Chief, and wrote of his exploits. Most of these stories are recorded under his other name of Big Brave.

One of the best stories recorded was written by James Willard Schultz. In addition to his fiction writing, Schultz also recorded stories of adventure and war directly related by those who took part. His style of writing has been criticized, but it reflects the style a story would be told in by a good Blackfoot-speaking story teller, for they loved the detail and visual impact of a good story.

Mountain Chief, known as Big Brave at the time of this story, was 14 years old. It was 1866, and the Peigans were camped in the Cypress Hills in Alberta. The Blackfoot had been at war with their one-time allies the Gros Ventre for three years. The Gros Ventre, or Entrails People as they are called in Blackfoot, had recently formed an alliance with the Crow tribe, longtime enemies of the Blackfoot.

Scouts for Sitting Woman, chief of the Gros Ventre, had seen the Peigans moving toward the Cypress Hills to build their Sundance. He felt that it was now time, with the added strength of the Mountain Crows, to wipe out the Peigans once and for all.

Confident of their superior numbers, the Gros Ventre and Crows brought their women and children to help with the plunder of the camps following the victory they were so sure of.

Advancing on the area where they thought the Peigans to be, the Gros Ventre scouts saw only six tipis. The remainder of the camp was hidden from their view by a long grove of trees. A young boy was out from camp looking for horses, and the scouts killed him silently with bow and arrow. When they reported back to Sitting Woman he felt the main camp

was further on and they decided to move forward, wipe out the small group, and locate the main camp.

The Peigans, in the meantime, had discovered the body of the boy, and saw the large body of enemy approaching. Silently the warriors gathered in the thick trees and awaited the coming force.

Confident of their victory, the combined force of Gros Ventre and Crows rode singing to the six tipis. It is here we pick up Mountain Chief's story:

"On they came, those many enemy warriors, wearing their war clothes, their war Bonnets, their feathered shields; their shining guns in hand, and oh, how powerfully, how strong-mindedly they sat upon their prancing horses. And how unsuspecting of the hundreds of us, staring out at them from the shelter of the grove. On they came, those proud Entrails and Crow warriors, and I began to tremble from fear of them. Would Many Horses never give us the cry to charge out at them? Well, when it came, I would turn and ride the other way, on and on, anywhere to be safe, I thought. He waited until the enemy leaders had come so near that we could



"Eagle Child, Mountain Chief, and Bear Medicine," mixed media, 39" x 26". Museum Permanent Collection. Gift of Peter and Christina Reiss.

almost see their eyes; and when he gave the shrill cry and his hundreds of warriors yelled it and charged out from the grove, I was somehow crazily with them and yelling, too.

“Ha! At the sight of us, what did those Entrails and Crow warriors do? Did they raise their guns and come hurrying to meet us? No! At once they turned and fled, they and their families, and we after them, in among them, shooting, shooting, shooting them down. There was so much to see at once: enemies falling, our warriors strewing the ground with them; women and children squalling, riding back as fast as they could go; pack horses and travios horses running in all directions and spilling their loads. I drew an arrow from my case, fitted it to my bow, began overtaking an enemy with intent to kill him; but when, with good aim, I drew back the bowstring with all my strength, it broke apart and I all but fell from my horse. He was an old, gray-haired one, that enemy, and he carried a gun, a short-barreled flintlock gun as I could plainly see.

“The bravest thing that a warrior can do is to seize an enemy’s gun, or bow, strike him with it, then kill him. I rode up close beside this old man, snatched his gun from him, and then he looked at me so pitifully, saying in my own language, ‘Oh, pity me. Do not kill me,’ that I only tapped his shoulder with the gun and let him go. For that, afterward, I got great praise and great scolding from my father. ‘You were very brave to seize the enemy’s gun, you so young, but you should have killed him,’ he said. ‘If you continue pitying your enemies, you can never, never become a real warrior.’

“Well, our chase and killing of the enemy ended, and the valley was strewn with their belongings; lodges and lodgepoles, lodge furnishings, buffalo robes and furs, clothing, parfleches of food. Came from our camp the women to gather up all these valuable things, and how they did sing and chatter and quarrel as they were doing it. Came, too, our old men, and began counting the enemy dead. They painted red the end of a stick for every body that they came to, and when they had finished, counted the sticks.

“ ‘Ha! My brave children, in all you have killed 363 of the enemy,’ one of them shouted to us and began singing, and we all sang with him. Oh, what a happy, happy day that was for us all.” (“Blackfeet and Buffalo,” pp 278-280)

SEPARATED-SPEAR-WOMAN

Separated-Spear-Woman was a prominent member of the Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Nation. At the time of her posing for Reiss she displayed her rank and achievements. She wears the Yellow Bird Headdress and blows the eagle bone whistle of the



“Separated Spear Woman In Bird Headdress,” mixed media, 39” x 26”. Museum Permanent Collection. Gift of Peter and Christina Reiss.

leader of the Bird Division, in the Woman’s Buffalo Society of the Bloods.

SWIMS UNDER

Born around 1868 to Gambler and Annie Gambler, Swims Under was a man with a foot in both camps as we would say. The free roaming and buffalo days were a part of his youth but the majority of his life was spent in the time of drastic change. It was a time when the Blackfoot people had to decide which parts, and how much, of this new way of life were to be accepted and which of their traditions were to be treasured or abandoned.

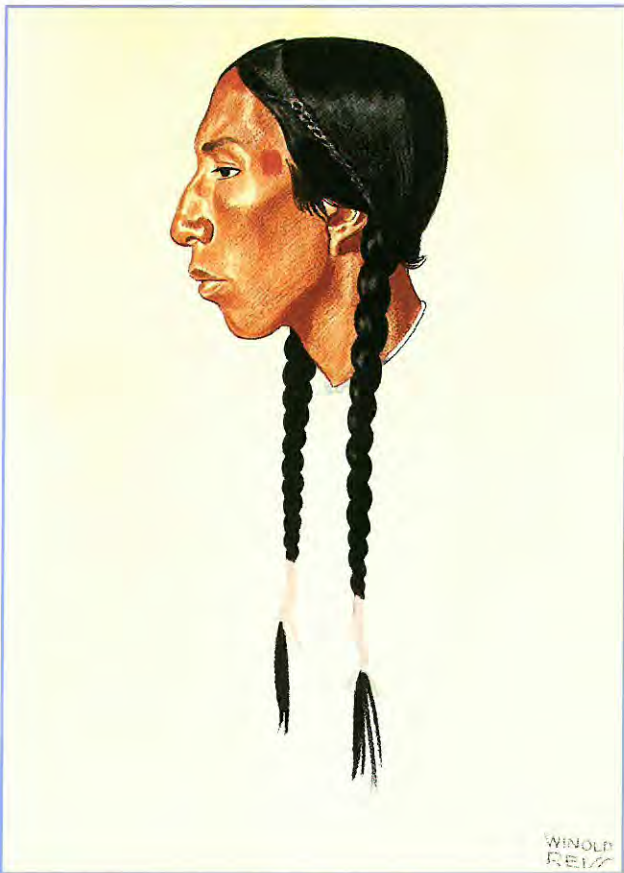
This particular portrait of Swims Under by Reiss shows some of that change. In it he wears western clothes and added Blackfoot accessories. It tells of a side of life as a successful rancher and horseman. Other portraits of him painted by Reiss show him wearing Weaseltail suits and Splithorn bonnets with eagle feather trailers, telling of a more traditional side.

His son, Mike Swims Under, now 77 years old, shared some of what his father was like. His father encouraged him to learn English and adapt to the new

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"Joseph Swims Under - Piegan," mixed media, 30" x 22". Museum Permanent Collection. Gift of Peter and Christina Reiss.



"Riding on Yellow Horse - Blood," mixed media, 30" x 22". Museum Permanent Collection. Gift of Peter and Christina Reiss.

way of living, but at the same time they lived by very strong Blackfoot family values. Old Swims Under was not only a rancher but he was also a major ceremonialist and religious leader. He and his wife owned a Beaver Bundle and Natoas, or Holy Sundance Headdress. These two items are the ultimate of Blackfoot religion and philosophy. Each have several hundred different songs, and ceremonial procedures, that had to be done correctly and in order. They were the base of Blackfoot Medicine Bundles and contained the origin and philosophy for many of the other Holy Ceremonies.

Swims Under and his wife had put up many Sundances and ran the ceremonies for many more. Because of his knowledge and sincerity he was called on to run Sundances among other divisions of the Blackfoot Nation. He was a humble man, preferring others to tell of his accomplishments. These were his values and knowledge, and these are the values and knowledge he passed on to his son Mike. And these are the values and knowledge his son is passing on to today's generations.

RIDING ON A YELLOW HORSE

The majority of the stories told here are second and third hand, but the story of Yellow-Horse-Rider is different. He was my friend and teacher. Maybe that's what makes it so hard to write about him. His life came after the days of buffalo and war parties, and yet, it too, is a reflection of the strength and character of the people Reiss painted. Many of Reiss's portraits preserved what the people were, but Yellow-Horse-Rider was to show what the future held. He would show that despite what every scholar, artist, and visitor since the 1880s claimed, they were not witnessing the "last" Sundance, or "last" Medicine Pipe Ceremony, or talking to the "last" Holy Man of the Blackfoot People. The future and culture of the Blackfoot was strong in 1930, and it is strong today because of people like Yellow-Horse-Rider.

Granted, it is not like the buffalo and warrior days, but the philosophy, religion, and base of the culture still exists. Change has happened, but change is a part of growth and if we don't grow, we die. After all, the people in France and England don't get around by ox cart any more, but we wouldn't say their culture is dead because of it.

Born in 1916 to Weasel Moccasin and Calling-Under-Woman, Yellow-Horse-Rider was

raised in Blackfoot tradition. His father was a highly regarded spiritual leader on the Blood Reserve and Yellow-Horse-Rider was to follow in those footsteps. As a young boy he became their Minipoka, or favorite child. In Blackfoot culture this meant he was transferred, and instructed in, many Medicine Bundles in his youth ("Minipokas..."; 1979; Vol. 4, No. 3) He managed to avoid boarding school and as a result only spoke Blackfoot throughout his life.

His life centered on the religion and ceremonies of the Blackfoot people. In addition to being a successful rancher and farmer, he learned the ceremonies and songs which he would eventually lead in his later years. During his lifetime he had many Medicine Bundles transferred to him, including painted tipi designs, headdresses, parts of the Sundance Bundle, parts of the Beaver Bundle, Thunder Medicine Pipe bundles, and was a member of the Horn Society nine times, eventually becoming an elder advisor for them.

When I first met Yellow-Horse-Rider he was a member of the Old Agency Singers, drumming at numerous Indian Day celebrations in the U.S. and Canada. He was well known for his composing and singing abilities. During the years that followed, I watched as he became an elder and took his turn to lead many of the Medicine pipe and All-Night-Smoking ceremonies. His high intelligence and strong voice enabled him to sing the hundreds of songs in their proper order, and with ease.

In his last years he taught many in the proper ceremonial procedure and songs of the various Medicine Bundles. Yellow-Horse-Rider was a man of great integrity who always offered words of encouragement and advice. He not only talked the talk, but he walked the walk, and showed the people by example how to live.

The week before his death he led the opening of the Blackfoot Thunder Medicine Pipe on the North Peigan Reserve. His voice boomed through the room as he sang those powerful songs. Between songs he instructed those present on the details of the Thunder Medicine Pipes and how things should be done. He also carried on during the numerous breaks with his wit and jokes, laughing in a deep, quiet way. For many of us that were there, it seems fitting that we remember Yellow-Horse-Rider sitting in the place of honor, singing and smiling, closing his life chapter the way he lived his life.

The old buffalo hunters are gone now, and so are the ones who lived in both worlds during that time of change. Winold Reiss left us with their faces, and the Blackfoot people still carry their stories, as well as the culture and tradition. Happily, Reiss and those elders

were wrong. It was not the close of Blackfoot culture, but just a chapter in the history of a people. The best remains, as it undoubtedly always will, despite change.



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In 1986, the C.M. Russell Museum sponsored an exhibition of Reiss works. Paul Raczka was the consulting curator, and wrote the text for a color exhibition catalog entitled "Portraits of the Races." Copies of this catalog are available in The Museum Shop for only \$7.00; 56 pages, historic photos, 71 full color reproductions.

References:

The Blood People

Adolf Hungry Wolf; Harper & Row, New York; 1977

"Minipokas - Children of Plenty"

Paul Raczka; American Indian Art Magazine, Scottsdale, Arizona; Vol. 4, No. 3; 1979

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James Willard Schultz; University of Oklahoma Press; Norman, Oklahoma; 1962