

Guardians of Glacier National Park

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Over the years Glacier National Park has had a number of watchful guardians. None, however, have been as popular or as embraced by the American public as the curious case of the Blackfeet Indians, also known as the Southern Piegan. Throughout most of the 19th century these horse-mounted buffalo hunters and their Blackfoot-speaking relatives lived on the grasslands and prairies of the upper reaches of the Saskatchewan, Missouri, and Yellowstone and referred to themselves as “Saokitapi” or “prairie people.” How did it happen that by the first half of the 20th century, in the minds of most Americans, these quintessential plains people had acquired a new home amid the glaciers and towering peaks of the Rocky Mountains? From this, to this. From John Mix Stanley’s engraving of the Blackfeet hunting buffalo at the Sweet Grass Hills in the early 1850s to Roland Reed’s pictorial Blackfeet presence in 1913, deep in the folds of a forested and vertical world. Had they been pressured off the plains, like the grizzly bear, driven to the western most edge of their territory, to what the Blackfeet elders traditionally have called the “Rocks”? How in the world did these prairie people, the Blackfeet, become so associated with Glacier National Park?

At the turn of the 20th century, Americans decided that America wasn’t what it had been—it had become too urban, too industrial, too exploited, and too materialistic. Interest in what had been the American West, however, flourished and many anxiously documented, recorded or consumed a nostalgic and remembered past.

The Southern Piegan of Montana, the Blackfeet, enjoyed a surprising amount of national attention regarding the “vanishing Indian,” because of the work of the photographer E. S. Curtis

and a number of popular books by George Bird Grinnell, James Willard Schultz, and Walter McClintock. In these publications the Blackfeet were still memorialized as a purely prairie people, but in subsequent photographs and stories, they had moved closer to the picketed fence of the Rocky Mountain Front to the west, to what the Blackfeet had called Mistakis or the Backbone of the World. The demise of the buffalo and other prairie animals and the relentless reductions of their treaty reservations forced them, like caterpillars, to leave their subsistence haunts in the protective cocoon of the plains to move closer to the park lands of the mountains and eventually to become in part, following its creation in 1910, the colorful guardians of Glacier Park.

Oddly enough, the Blackfeet had almost nothing to do with this last fanciful transformation. It was not their doing. In fact, their leadership, under both White Calf and Three Suns, had been willing to sell what was to become the eastern half of Glacier Park, the so-called “Ceded Strip” to the United States, that mountainous country from the continental divide to the reservation boundary in their last treaty, fifteen years earlier, in 1895. They had needed the money to develop a fledgling cattle industry on the plains and the “rocks” or highest mountains were considered expendable, especially if they could continue to exercise use rights, such as cutting wood, hunting and gathering, as provided in the agreement.

Nor was it the United States Congress that determined in 1910 that the Blackfeet would be the putative guardians of their legislative creation as it attempted to secure forever what would be called the “Crown of the Continent.” Instead, surprisingly enough, the culprit was a single individual, a brash railroader by the name of Louis W. Hill, President of the Great Northern Railway Company. Hill had assumed the direction of the railway in 1909. Because the railroad ran along side the proposed national park and because of his belief that a national park

would benefit the Great Northern, he had quietly lobbied Montana's senator Thomas Carter, urging congressional action. Successful, soon thereafter, Hill set up a subsidiary company, The Glacier Park Hotel Company, to construct, attract, and operate tourist facilities as a concessionaire. Hill, together with the Great Northern Publicity Department, then set in motion an ingenious nation wide promotional campaign that was designed to put the Blackfeet, or at least a portion of them, what came to be called the "Glacier Park Indians," into the newly created park as a dominant presence and a major attraction. If they, the buffalo people, the prairie people, were not geographically or historically where he needed them to be, in the interior fastness of the mountains, where earlier visitors were more likely to have encountered the Kootenai hunting mountain sheep with dogs or the Salish on their way to hunt buffalo on the plains, then, with the can-do attitude of the period, he, Hill, via the transformative power of advertising, would perceptually move them there.

Why was Hill interested in this promotional sleight of hand? Unlike his father, James J. Hill, the original Empire Builder, who had put together the Great Northern, the last of the transcontinental railroads, Louis Hill thought passengers or tourists a worthy foundation for a modern, 20th century railroad. His father had focused on hauling freight, going so far as to compare passengers to the male teat—neither useful nor ornamental. For Hill junior, however, "every passenger that goes to the national parks," he said, "...represents practically a net earning. We already have the train facilities for taking care of the regular traffic." Tourism would help the bottom line.

Yet the U.S. government had no money and little interest in building tourist facilities or promoting the infant park. Louie Hill would have to do that himself—and he did. Between 1911 and 1914 the Great Northern spent hundreds of thousands of dollars constructing hotels, camps,

roads and trails and, in a revved-up, highly creative publicity campaign that made it up as it went, Hill tried to persuade American tourists, that rather than travel to Europe to find memorable monuments and to spend their dollars, to “See America First.”

What was there for American tourists to see? Like any good entrepreneur, Hill hedged his bets, holding out not just one or two offerings, but a bouquet of attractions in what today would be called his emerging theme park.

Building on the popularity of the Colorado Rockies and especially the spas of Colorado Springs, Hill deemed Glacier Park, with its extensive glaciers and snowfields, the real “American Switzerland.” It was every bit as impressive as the European Alps and yet different, better. Instead of an inhabited world of stone villages, steeped churches and tinkling cow bells, Glacier Park offered “real wilderness” with megafauna, grizzly bears, elk, mountain lions and mountain goats, in a natural setting—not in some kind of tricked up zoo. Moreover, Glacier was educational—a scientific laboratory where geologic time was laid bare, where flora and fauna reigned supreme, as they used to—God’s country, the place where the Lord sat after the creation and rested, a surviving last domain on the roof of the continent, where “it was as in the beginning.” And not only that, Glacier National Park contained an anthropological dimension for within this primeval paradise could still be found a third theme, Piegans or Blackfeet living in something of their primitive splendor.

Artfully utilizing the public’s then fascination with vanishing Indian cultures, Hill consciously inserted the Blackfeet in this natural paradise—a pairing of wilderness and of a primitive people. Seen from the sheltering hotels, protected from the troubled present, the railroad sought to give a portion of the Blackfeet a new location, a new history, a new tourist

identity, if not a new ethnicity. Emerging as a new species, the Glacier Park Indians became a most appealing cultural attraction.

If these themes did not arouse sufficient interest, Glacier Park was also pitched as “the nation’s newest playground,” where the trout fishing was irresistible and the well-heeled and well-educated, including women, could engage in camping, mountain climbing, and group trail rides and pack trips, led by that other romantic figure of western myth, cowboys, now transmogrified into dude wranglers, in kerchiefs and western gear.

Glacier National Park, said the Great Northern, featured “The lure of the wild with the comforts of home” and it was serviced by, as I have said, an amazing system of grand hotels and log lodges, Swiss-style chalets, and tepee camps, connected by roads, stages, lake launches, and, of course, trails. Much of the architecture was of Swiss or rustic inspiration. These structures reminded tourists that they were in the Alps. If there were any doubts, waiters soon appeared in “Lederhosen” and waitresses in the equivalent of “Dirndls.”

As for the Blackfeet, the Great Northern featured them even more prominently in the life of the park, particularly on their side of the mountains, where a majority of the railroad concessions had been located. Sometimes this was done in conjunction with the alpine theme, however incongruous, but more often alone. Assuming the role of knowledgeable ethnographic authorities, the Publicity Department again and again told the history of the Blackfeet and creatively related it to the park. Using magic lantern shows, photographs, paintings, tepees and artifacts as well as colorful place names, legends, stories and crafts, the Great Northern “selectively” appropriated for the railroad and its profit, the Blackfeet past. A never-ending blizzard of printed pamphlets, paintings, brochures, calendars, post-cards, match-covers, stamps, and playing cards reminded prospective tourists of the Blackfeet presence and their involvement

in the park. If this cheesy bric-a-brac were not enough, Hill and the Great Northern lured legions of prominent newspaper men to the park with free vacations in the expectation that they would write stories across the nation about what they saw and experienced.

And it wasn't just paper, images, and artifacts—the railroad also hired older, full blood families, colorful elders and veterans of the inter-tribal war period, the so-called “good type Indians,” to leave Browning and the neighboring reservation and come up to the park, especially to main hub, the Glacier Park Lodge, to become a living part of a promised pageantry. These carefully chosen individuals and families signed formal summer contracts. The Great Northern paid them to set up painted lodges, to camp on the hotel grounds, to dress in feathered bonnets and beaded finery to greet the tourists as they filed off the in-coming trains. Fred Big Top, we're told, “made every No.3 and No. 4 for sixty days and was able to take from twenty-five to seventy-five people over to see the Hotel each fifteen minute stop made by these trains.” Escorted across the manicured lawns and perennial flower gardens to the reception in the impressive Forest Lobby of the lodge, the hotel guests encountered Indian Door Girls who graciously ushered them to their rooms or to the snowy linens of the elegant dining room, itself decked out in Blackfeet artifacts.

The men earned extra money or reciprocal gifts by conducting popular adoption ceremonies in which the big wigs would be stood on a blanket amid a throng of people and the thud of hand drums. Given a colorful name or maybe an appropriate name, (President Roosevelt was Lone Chief; opera singer Titto Ruffo, in 1914, “Big Thunder”) the recipients would then be ceremoniously shoved into the world with a new name as honorary Blackfeet. Tanned deer-skin certificates of adoption attesting to the ceremony followed.

Curly Bear and others did a brisk business selling postcards of himself in the main lobby of the Glacier Park Hotel and was willing, for an extra coin, to autograph these photographs with his distinctive signature. George Bull Child painted deer hides with impressive war records of an earlier time and peddled them as souvenirs, while wives sold handmade dolls and peddled miniature painted tepees. Other Indians drove tour buses, acted as guides and camp rustlers for horse parties, caddied on the golf course, or worked at the hotel. Here is Jennie, daughter of Many Tail Feathers, the Hotel Hello-Girl, fielding calls at the hotel's switch-board.

These Blackfeet, dressed traditionally as best they could, posed for tourist snap-shooters, grass danced to drum and rattle, told stories of places and events, as if time had stood still. They also led trail rides, recreated picturesque tipi camps at the water's edge or simply stood or sat silhouetted against a dramatic skyline. It was pure promotional gimmickry and romantic nonsense. Yet American travelers loved it—it was what they had come for—to see the frontier America they unfortunately had missed.

Known as the “Glacier Park Indians” or “Blackfeet of the Glacier Park Reservation,” the Great Northern Publicity Department not only sent stories and pictures of these native stereotypes across the country, they sent the real thing, actual delegations made up of men, women and children, to influential organizations who invited them or to major urban events that were likely to attract a great deal of public attention. The idea was to pitch the attractions of Glacier Park and to remind these American audiences that it was still possible to see in the twentieth century “real” Indians in an edenic wilderness setting. National magazines, *Travel* and *Leslie's*, cautioned, however, “Scenes like these will not be witnessed long.” It was not unlike the current fashion, what the *New York Times* has termed the “tourism of doom”—the yearning to see something before it disappears. Then, it was the summer sun dance or the much trumpeted

Last Grass Dance, now, in the light of global warming, it is the desire to see polar bears, to be among the last to ascent the disappearing snow fields of Mount Kilimanjaro —or closer to home, to experience the glaciers of Glacier National Park.

The Glacier Park Indians were a big hit. There were successful excursions to the Rose Festival in Portland, Oregon and to land shows at Grand Central Palace in New York, where to the delight of the urbanites in March 1913, they set up their tepees and camped on the roof of the McAlpin Hotel. Where ever they went, these quaint ambassadors generated columns of newspaper coverage, photographs, human interest stories and public attention.

More ambitious national tours followed, naturally, including an appearance at the Shriner's national convention in Atlanta, Georgia or the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915 in San Francisco. The promotion easily morphed into news reels and movies, from the early Lyman Howe Travelogues, "A Day in the Life of a Glacier Park Indian," to the participation of a contingent from Browning, Montana, who starred in the 1939 Hollywood flick, "Susannah of the Mounties" featuring Shirley Temple and Randolph Scott.

Artists had from the outset been critical in promoting the park. Louie Hill was himself a painter and easily recognized the power of combining color and images. He spent \$50,000 in 1911 alone to purchase oil paintings, including Charley Russell, to be exhibited at the Land and Irrigation Show in New York. Some of the artists were derisively known as Frontier Vermeers and Sagebrush Rembrandts. John Fery did so many mountain landscapes and in such large size for depots and land shows, for example, that he was accused of being paid by the square yard.

Louie Hill did not forget or ignore Blackfeet artists. He reported in 1915 that the principal decoration in the lobby of the new Many Glacier Hotel would be "three or four hundred feet of Indian paintings, made by a number of Indians, each one telling the story of his life." On

his instructions the Great Northern hired some twenty five Blackfeet, veterans of the intertribal warfare, to record in picture-writing their war honors and escapades, their adventures scouting and horse-raiding. We will hear more about this effort this afternoon with James Dempsey.

Hoping to elevate his advertising art and to include even more of the Glacier Park Indians, Hill invited a number of photographers and painters to Glacier including Winold Reiss. Reiss produced realistic, highly decorative portraits of Blackfeet individuals. Featuring Lazy Boy, Buffalo Body, Scalping Woman, or Two Guns White Calf, reproductions of these portraits not only adorned Great Northern advertising calendars distributed nationally from 1928 to 1959, they enjoyed unprecedented popularity, becoming cherished collector's items.

Reiss's cast of Blackfeet characters changed with the passing of the decades, just as the earlier cast of the Glacier Park Indians had. Elders among the Park Indians passed away or grew tired of the routine and were replaced with a new generation. The earlier theme of "get here before it is too late," while not fully discarded, was down-played. The Blackfeet were obviously still there. Nonetheless, over time the Glacier Park Indians remained an indelible feature and a powerful iconography of what the park had always represented and visitors expected—a last sanctuary of real wilderness and real Indians.

We began with the question how did the Blackfeet become the guardians of Glacier Park, which was another way of determining who put or kept the Blackfeet in the conceptual picture? The immediate culprit, I've argued, was, of course, Louie W. Hill and the publicity department of the Great Northern Railway with the help of a select few of the Blackfeet themselves. They were surprisingly successful and, as a consequence, the Great Northern went beyond simply attracting tourists, making a profit, or aiding in the recovery of a proud Blackfeet past. It changed people's perceptions. And while it may have been inadvertent, the Great

Northern's emphasis on the role of the Blackfeet in Glacier Park made sure that in the public's mind, at any rate, Indians stayed a part of any definition of wilderness in the American West.

Concepts such as wilderness, nature, and park nature are never monolithic or constant, but always ambivalent and fluctuating. Advertising and journalism, artistic renditions, stories and legends had their impact. Pristine lands without human occupation would, of course, hold the emerging concept of wilderness in an imaginative hammerlock and recommend policies that diminished or erased much of the native past, a policy historian Mark Spence has termed "dispossessing the wilderness." But it was a tough sell in Glacier Park, because a romantic American public had been already convinced that Blackfeet belonged there. Moreover, popular culture wanted them to remain there—perhaps only past tense and only symbolic, but still Blackfeet—in their park, the park they called Glacier. The Blackfeet had become an integral part of the park experience.