

**Relations between the Blackfoot-speaking peoples and fur trade companies  
(c. 1830-1840)**

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**The five Blackfoot shirts in the Pitt Rivers Museum collections were acquired by Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, and his secretary Edward Hopkins in 1841. Simpson was on a tour of the Company's western posts that year, and spent a few days at Fort Edmonton in late July. During this visit, many Blackfoot-speaking people came to the post, both to trade and to see the Governor. In trying to understand the context in which the shirts were acquired by HBC senior officers, we will look here at the nature of relationships between Niitsitapi and the trading companies in the years from 1830 to 1840. We have used Niitsitapi in this short introduction to refer collectively to all the Blackfoot-speaking peoples or to those people who were from one of the three groups (Piikani, Kainai and Siksika), but who are not clearly identified in the historical record.**

***Fur trade sources***

As we examine this history, we need to think about the sources available to reconstruct and understand these relationships. Historians who write about the relations between Niitsitapi and Europeans or Americans use sources as varied as fur trade company records, archaeological surveys, missionary accounts and artworks created by visitors to the region. Niitsitapi winter counts and stories are also used to explore the complexities of Niitsitapi relations with fur traders and other incomers. While many of the sources are weighted towards the perspectives of Europeans, if their deficiencies are borne in mind archival records can nevertheless be tremendously informative and add a great deal to knowledge of Niitsitapi experiences in the past. Most fur trade records, for example, were written by European men who had never set foot in a Niitsitapi camp. Their experiences were limited to what they witnessed at the forts where they worked, or what they observed when travelling between posts. Furthermore, although some traders could speak fluent Blackfoot, others were less able to communicate effectively with their Niitsitapi trading partners. Nevertheless, although fur traders did not understand Niitsitapi well, they sometimes recorded their actions and so these comments can help us understand why Niitsitapi chose to behave as they did.

There are also gaps in the years covered by the written records. There are no post journals for Fort Edmonton from 1834 to 1854, for example, although the accounts books for the early 1840s have survived. Although the unevenness of the written documentation presents challenges, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives contains many documents which will be consulted as the Blackfoot Shirts Project progresses. It is hoped that these records may provide some clues to explain how and why Sir George Simpson and Edward Hopkins acquired the five shirts. In an effort to provide some historical background for the shirts we draw upon the *written* record to summarise here what is currently known about the years immediately leading up their visit to Fort Edmonton. Archival research on this topic is on-going, and this essay will be updated as more historical information is located.

### ***The Niitsitapi and their trading partners, 1830-40***

The 1830s was a period of considerable change in relationships between the Niitsitapi and fur traders on both sides of the line. As major partners in a global system of trade, Niitsitapi at this time exerted considerable influence over how successfully fur trade companies, such as the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada and the American Fur Company, which operated on the Upper Missouri, were able to conduct business. As a result, their relations shifted constantly according to the needs, interests and policies of Niitsitapi bands. Relations between the Niitsitapi and other nations living in the Northern Plains were also unstable during this period and Niitsitapi involvement in the fur trade must be seen within this wider context. Over a relatively short time period, access to horses and guns had transformed inter-tribal relations. In order to survive and maintain military and political control, Niitsitapi bands had to ensure they were better supplied with guns and ammunition than their neighbours. At first this meant increasing their own trade with the HBC and restricting that of their competitors, but once their neighbours across the Rocky Mountains had direct access to European trade goods, the Niitsitapi began to shift their own policies towards the trading companies. By the late 1820s, Niitsitapiksi, and in particular the Piikani, whose territory was rich in beaver, temporarily put aside cultural prohibitions and environmental constraints to trap enormous numbers of these animals and, in turn, receive greater quantities of trade items.

Until the early 1830s the HBC monopolised the fur trade in the Rocky Mountain area. The Saskatchewan District, centred around Fort Edmonton, was the company's most profitable region. HBC policy at this time was to encourage the Niitsitapi to come to posts on the North Saskatchewan

River, on the northern fringes of their territory. At this time, Rocky Mountain House was the company's busiest post, and although many Niitsitapi bands and other First Nations traded here, by the 1830s the HBC regarded it as principally for the Piikani. There were fewer beaver in Kainai and Siksika territory, and although Kainai and Siksika bands also traded furs, they were more involved with supplying the HBC with provisions such as pemmican, dried meat and dressed hides. The last surviving post journal for Fort Edmonton until the mid-nineteenth century was written in 1834 and shows that Niitsitapi visited this post throughout the year. On 20 February 1835, for instance, the author of the Edmonton journal noted that a group of 57 Blackfeet and a small number of "Circies" (the spelling used by some traders for 'Sarcees' [Tsuu T'ina]) men, plus women and children, left the post following a trading exchange in which they brought these materials to the post:

74 wolves	60 half buffalo skins
70 kit foxes	227 buffalo tongues
11 Red foxes	400 # grease
2 badgers	24 kegs pounded meats
2 otters	2 horses
1 beaver	and a little fresh meat
4 robes buffalo	
110 rats	

The author complained that this was not much for such a large group of people. He did not record what they received in exchange for these goods but it probably included cloth of different colours and weights, awls, ice chisels, axe and hatchet heads, possibly blankets or capotes (blanket coats), tobacco, ammunition, guns, liquor and glass beads, thimbles and small bells used for decoration.

The author of part of this journal was possibly Chief Factor John Rowand, who had spent many years in western Canada and had considerable experience as a trader. He was married to a Métis woman and had relatives in many bands; he was greatly respected by First Nations, Métis, and Europeans alike. HBC officers like Rowand usually recorded if visitors to the forts were Piikani, Siksika or Kainai, although sometimes they used fur trade names for these nations, such as "Muddy River Indians" for the Piikani, and did not always distinguish between different groups, simply referring to all Blackfoot-speaking peoples as "Blackfeet"). Though they occasionally named

individuals, for example, prominent leaders with whom they traded, we have not yet found any references to specific bands. The size of visiting groups varied and sometimes bands from several nations travelled together. For example on 28 July 1834, 260 “Blackfeet men, women and children” visited Fort Edmonton to trade and stayed for two days. On 28 December 1834 a smaller group of “eight Blackfeet men” and “some women and children” visited the post with a few pelts to trade. Just as there was some variation in the numbers of people who came to the posts, there was also variation in the length of their stay, but often visits were for no more than two days before a group returned to the security of their own territory.

Although the records show that there were several visits throughout the year from Niitsitapi groups, Fort Edmonton, Carlton House and Rocky Mountain House were a considerable distance from Niitsitapi territory. The archival record suggests that the Piikani, in particular, were keen that the HBC establish a trading post closer to their hunting grounds.<sup>1</sup> It was clear that beaver were being over-hunted in the North Saskatchewan River region and the HBC was keen to open up trade in the southern part of Niitsitapi territory. The Bow River Expedition of 1822 established a small post below the forks of the Red Deer and South Saskatchewan rivers but there was no evidence of extensive beaver populations, and the post was not kept manned. That same year, the American Fur Company entered the Upper Missouri for the first time. For the next eight years relations between the Niitsitapi and the Americans were tense, with casualties on both sides. The Americans had neither asked permission to come into the region nor to trap beaver themselves, acts which were viewed suspiciously and as threatening by Niitsitapi leaders. Although the American traders blamed the HBC for stirring up trouble, no written evidence for this claim has been located.<sup>2</sup>

The turning point in relations between the Niitstapiksi and American fur traders was in 1830, when *Stomi'ksaosa'k* [Buffalo Bull Back Fat] and his band were persuaded to come to Fort Union to trade. The following year the American Fur Company established Fort Piegan as the first American

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<sup>1</sup> David Smyth (2001: 291) uses HBC records to demonstrate that the claims of previous scholars that the *Niitsitapi* resisted having trading posts within their territory were unfounded. Many earlier historians focussed on US sources and had less access to the HBC Archives, which contain some of the most detailed historical material relating to *Niitsitapi*-European relations. Some repeated commonly-held assumptions about social relations in the fur trade without providing extensive evidence to support their claims or trying to analyse the motives of *Niitsitapi* participants. Smyth's research offers a more nuanced analysis; by emphasising political relationships and diplomacy in Blackfoot country he helps us to understand *Niitsitapi* behaviour at this time.

<sup>2</sup> Ted Binnema (2006: 328) writes that in reality during this period “Niitsitapi bands were less hostile to Americans and less friendly to the British and Canadians than most Americans believed at the time, and most historians have assumed since.”

trading post in Niitsitapi territory. This was followed by Fort MacKenzie in 1833, the post run until 1840 by Alexander Culbertson, the husband of a Kainai woman, *Naatoyisttsiiksiinaakii* [Holy Snake Woman]. As well as the family ties that brought some Niitsitapi to trade with the Americans, these posts in Blackfoot territory were more convenient for Niitsitapi hunters than travelling north to the HBC forts. In addition, because trade goods could be shipped more easily and cheaply using river transportation, they were less expensive than at the HBC posts on the North Saskatchewan River. Around the same time, changing fashions in Europe meant that there was less demand for beaver pelts and the American fur trade companies began to trade more heavily in buffalo hides, a move which was more culturally acceptable to the Niitsitapi. The HBC posts, not being located on a major river system, were unable to transport buffalo robes so easily as their American competitors. For these reasons the Niitsitapi began to engage more frequently and in greater numbers with the Upper Missouri fur trade. Keen to maintain the competition between the American and British companies, however, the Piikani continued to petition for a HBC post within their territory. Bow Fort (Peigan Post) on the Bow River was established in 1832 to counteract the American trade and to attract the Piikani, but was not a success. The Piikani preferred to trade with the Americans, who gave them a better deal for their pelts, and they simply stayed away. Some Kainai and Siksika came to Bow Fort, but were antagonised by the HBC's attempts to encourage them to travel to Fort Edmonton, over 200 miles north, and what they saw as favouritism towards the Piikani. Peigan Post was not economically viable when there were American posts even closer to the Piikani and in 1839 Sir George Simpson wrote to his superiors in London that the HBC should no longer try to recover the Piikani trade.

Although there are no HBC journals for the early 1840s for Fort Edmonton, where the five Blackfoot shirts were collected, we know from these earlier documents that Niitsitapi people wanted trading forts near and in their territories, and that they desired positive relationships with traders. Different groups of Niitsitapi took different approaches to the fur trade, with some trading more beaver during the early period and others trading pemmican, hides, robes, and other provisions. The American traders were also trying to maintain strong ties and positive relations with Niitsitapi peoples, and this concerned to the HBC, who rightly predicted that their own business interests would be threatened. There were many sets of relationships at stake in the fur trade, and the exchange of garments was part of pre-trade diplomatic formalities for trade and for maintaining social and business relations. It was within these contexts that either Sir George Simpson, or his secretary, Edward Hopkins, acquired the five Blackfoot shirts.

Questions to consider:

Why did Nitsitapi people go to Fort Edmonton to trade?

Why might the shirts have been given to the head of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1841?

How did traders change Nitsitapi life?

Are there trade goods on the shirts?

What kinds of goods did Nitsitapi people trade for?

## **References**

### **Primary sources**

Hudson's Bay Company Archives, B.60/d/69 Edmonton House Account Book, 1841-42

Hudson's Bay Company Archives, B.60/a/28 Edmonton Post Journal, 1833-34

Simpson, George 1847. *Narrative of a Journey Round the World, During the Years 1841 and 1842*. Vol. 1. London: Henry Colburn.

### **Secondary sources**

Binnema, Ted 2006. 'Allegiances and interests: Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) trade, diplomacy, and warfare, 1806-1831'. *Western Historical Quarterly* 37 (Autumn): 327-49

Smyth, David 2001. 'The Niitsitapi Trade: Euroamericans and the Blackfoot-speaking Peoples to the mid-1830s.' Unpublished PhD dissertation, Carleton University

*Other suggestions for reading can be found on the list of suggested websites and reading materials.*