

How did the shirts get to the Pitt Rivers Museum?

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What was going through their minds, when they gave those shirts?

Earl Old Person, 29 July 2009

The five Blackfoot shirts in Oxford were acquired in the summer of 1841 during Governor Sir George Simpson's inspection of the Hudson's Bay Company's western fur trade posts, but we have little specific information on when and how they were collected. Simpson and his secretary, Edward Hopkins, arrived at Fort Edmonton in late July. What we know of their visit comes principally from an essay Simpson wrote about the Blackfoot while he stayed there, and from the published *Narrative* describing his journey around the world. For July 26th 1841 he reported:

On the third day after our arrival, the firing of guns on the opposite side of the river, which was heard early in the morning, announced the approach of nine native chiefs, who came forward in advance of a camp of fifty lodges, which was again followed by another camp of six times the size. These chiefs were Blackfeet, Piegans, Sarcees, and Blood Indians, all dressed in their grandest clothes and decorated with scalp locks. I paid them a visit, giving each of them tobacco....Our nine visitors remained the whole morning, smoking and sleeping; nor would they take their departure till they had obtained a present for each of the chiefs that were coming behind them (Simpson, 1847: 104).

Camps of this size may have been on diplomatic business at the post, as much as on regular trade visits, and the shirts may have been a formal gift to Simpson as the head of the Hudson's Bay Company, or to his secretary, Hopkins. The exchange of clothing was a common feature of fur trade diplomacy and was often a precursor to trading. For example, the artist Paul Kane, who travelled in western Canada in the 1840s, described such an exchange which took place along the North Saskatchewan River between Forts Pitt and Carlton:

...Next morning we embarked, after having presented the chiefs with eight or ten pounds of tobacco to be distributed amongst the rest, and had not proceeded many miles, when we had to put ashore again to gratify an old Blood Indian chief, who had arrived at the camp shortly after our departure, and had galloped immediately after us, for the purpose of having a talk with Mr Harriott [Chief Trader of the HBC], whom he had known many years before, and for whom he entertained the warmest friendship. After the talk, he stripped himself naked, excepting his breech-cloth. Mr Harriott, not to be behindhand with him, gave him everything but his shirt and pantaloons: it was rather a losing operation for him; although the chief's leather shirt and leggings were quite new and highly ornamented, yet they were not exactly what Mr Harriott would like to wear, so he gave them to me to add to my stock of Indian costumes (Kane 1996: 300).

A similar exchange was also recalled by the Kainai leader, Red Crow, who told trader and ethnographer R.N. Wilson about an encounter that probably took place in the 1860s:

Away up on the Saskatchewan we saw a fleet of thirty boats going down the river. The white men landed on our side, and we sat in a big circle and received many presents. There were three principal chiefs in our party, who took the goods and distributed to all. The white men told us that the gifts were to encourage us to trade with them. Blankets, tobacco, and goods of all kinds were given to us. In return some of the men took off their fancy dress, and presented them to the chief of the boat people (Middleton 1953:156 cited in Brownstone 2002: 40).

There are several historical accounts of the exchange or gifting of clothing in the written records throughout the northern Plains and several of these involve Blackfoot men in particular. The presentation of cloth outfits to chiefs as part of Treaty payments was an extension of this practice. There are also instances of Europeans acquiring decorated shirts during or immediately following the negotiations for Treaty 7. Indeed, an outfit formerly belonging to Crowfoot was acquired by Cecil Denny, a NWMP Officer who was present at the signing of Treaty 7. This outfit is now in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, UK (Pratt, 2006). Likewise, a shirt that belonged to Red Crow is now in the British Museum in London, UK, and may have been presented by him to the Canadian Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald. There are also other Blackfoot shirts in museum collections which were presented to fur traders that date to the same time as the shirts in the Pitt Rivers Museum. For example, Alexander Culbertson, the husband of a Kainai woman, *Naatoyisttsiiksiinaakii* [Holy Snake Woman], and the head trader at the American Fur Company's Upper Missouri post, Fort McKenzie, was given a hairlock shirt by the Blackfoot warrior Woman's Moccasin in 1843. This shirt is now in the collection of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery (Peterson with Peers 1993: 71; Wischmann 2004).

During the period of Simpson and Hopkins's travels, traders often presented what were referred to as "Chief's coats" or "laced coats" to those men with whom they wished to create alliances (Hanson 1982). These coats were often of scarlet cloth and were decorated with lace at the collar and cuffs. They also represented status and prestige for their new owners. Prince Maximilian of Neuwied described seeing Blackfoot men wearing coats like this during his 1833 visit to Fort McKenzie:

...In front of the Indians we saw three or four chiefs in red and blue uniforms trimmed with lace, and wearing round hats with plumes of feathers. The most distinguished among them was *Mi'ksskimmiisoka'simi* [Iron Shirt], dressed in a scarlet uniform, with blue facings and lace, with a drawn sabre in his hand; riding without stirrups, he managed, with great dexterity, his light bay horse, which was made very restiff by the firing of the musketry (Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1976: 100).

He also described events following a meal hosted by *Mi'ksskimmiisoka'simi*:

...After we had finished, the chief ate what was left in the dish, and took out of a bag a chief's scarlet uniform, with blue facings and yellow lace, which he had received from the English, six red and black plumes of feathers, a dagger with its sheath, a coloured pocket-handkerchief, and two beaver skins, all which he laid before Mr Mitchell as a present, who was obliged to accept these things whether he liked or not, thereby laying himself under the obligation of making presents in return, and especially a new uniform.... (Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1976: 101).

Although there is no specific written information as to why Sir George Simpson was given the shirts, he may have received them as a precursor to trading or as part of a diplomatic exchange similar to those described by Kane and Maximilian. The archival record shows that the inventory of property owned by the HBC at Fort Edmonton and prepared on 1st June 1841 included “5 chiefs laced coats”. It is possible that these five coats were exchanged for the five shirts now in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Some Elders with whom we have consulted have suggested that in making alliances and strengthening relationships, valuable objects such as the shirts might have been given to show that the Blackfoot were bargaining in good faith.

Simpson and Hopkins left Fort Edmonton with Chief Factor John Rowand on 28 July 1841 and travelled to Fort Vancouver and from there to Honolulu where the HBC also had business interests. Simpson then continued on his voyage around the world overland through Siberia and western Europe while Hopkins returned with Rowand to Fort Edmonton in early 1842 before continuing east to York Factory, and from there to London. It is not clear where the shirts were during this time, but it is possible that they were sent to Lachine, Lower Canada, where the HBC warehouse and offices were, and where both Simpson and Hopkins lived, to await the return of the Governor and his secretary the following spring. The shirts stayed with Hopkins rather than becoming part of Simpson’s own collection and were likely displayed in Hopkins’ home in Lachine: many fur traders used such collections as decoration, and the shirts are pierced with old nail and tack holes suggesting that they were displayed. In 1870 Hopkins retired from the fur trade and with his wife, the artist Frances Anne Hopkins, lived in London until 1891 when they moved to Henley-on-Thames, a small town close to Oxford. The shirts have been in the Pitt Rivers Museum since 1893 when they were purchased from the Hopkins family along with other artefacts collected on the 1841-1842 journey, including bows and arrows, a cradleboard, a Northwest Coast mask, an embroidered Métis pouch, and a Plateau shirt and leggings.

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