

# Kaahsinnooniksi Ao'toksisawooyawa

Our ancestors have come to visit:  
*Reconnections with historic Blackfoot shirts*



## THE PLAIN SHIRT

*"This is my favourite shirt. It looks really old.  
It would have a story to tell"* Jackie Parsons, Blackfeet

---

Laura Peers, curator: *I don't find that this shirt tells me much. It's really plain.*

Heather Richardson, conservator: *It tells you that not everything was great and glorious; that sometimes people just had to wear something!*

This is a work shirt, an ordinary covering for protecting the body from wind and from branches when walking through the bush. Perhaps used as an outer layer when it was snowing. It shows its hard life: there are many tears at the neck, where it has been pulled on and off.

The hide on the neck flap is wrinkled as if it got soaked in the rain or snow, and perhaps dried by the fire afterwards. It looks beaten up, as if it has been used for heavy work in bad weather.



---

Such hide shirts were commonly worn by traders and travellers as well as by Blackfoot people. Writing of a hunting expedition into the mountains from Blackfoot territory in 1859 – 60, the Earl of Southesk stated,

*“No woollen clothes can stand against these horrible thickets, full of sharp ends of broken branches... Fortunately I had clad myself in Mr. Hardisty’s present – the leather hunting-shirt, which was very comfortable, as well as a complete protection against the hardened spikes that met one at every turn.”*





The hide is not as finely tanned as the hide used on the decorated shirts: it is rough, especially on the inside. The hide appears poorly prepared – some areas are very thin and there are several areas where the top layer of the hide has not been scraped fully during preparation. This shirt is made of a thicker hide than the hide used for the decorated shirts.

Tears have been left unmended on this shirt, while on the other shirts very careful repairs have been made. On the front right there is a hasty and basic repair using sinew, done by a Blackfoot person before the shirt was collected.



On the front of the shirt body, you can see that the lower 'legs' of the animal which hang down are actually pieced together with scraps of hide to make the shirt front match the back in shape. Perhaps the hide used for this work shirt was smaller or more damaged than usual?

The cuffs on this shirt look as if they might have been cut off to shorten the sleeves. We don't know if this was the way the sleeves were originally, or whether they were made narrow and shorter at the wrists after Hopkins acquired it.



You can see a great deal of damage around the top of the neck opening in this shirt. The shirt has been made so that there is a very small neck opening, and the wearer of the shirt has had to force it over his head, causing damage.



You can see that the fringe at the sleeve/body seam has been cut after it was sewn into the shirt. Cutting the fringe has left cut marks in the body hide on the back left side of the shirt.



## TREATMENT

As well as cleaning the hide of this shirt, we removed old repairs to the hide. We think these were done after the shirts came to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1893. These repairs, which used cotton thread and crude stitching, were distorting the shape of the shirt and actually causing damage. We released these stitches and added supportive material around the tears in the hide. Heather Richardson made felted wool patches, dyed to match the hide, so the damage is not so visible.

**Laura Peers, curator, and Heather Richardson, conservator**  
**Pitt Rivers Museum**