

THE PIEGAN FAMINE.

Blackfoot Lodge Tales by George Bird Grinnell, New York, 1892:

(388) The Blackfoot of to-day. ---

During the winter of 1883-84 more than a quarter of the Piegan tribe of the Blackfeet, which then numbered about twenty-five or twenty-six hundred, died from starvation. It had been reported to the Indian Bureau that the Blackfeet were practically self-supporting and needed few supplies. As a consequence of this report, appropriations for them were small. The statement was entirely and fatally misleading. The Blackfeet had then never done anything toward self-support, except to kill buffalo. But just before this, in the year 1883, the buffalo had been exterminated from the Blackfoot country. In a moment, and without warning, the people had been deprived of the food supply on which they had depended. At once they had turned their attention to the smaller game, and, hunting faithfully the river bottoms, the brush along the small streams, and the sides of the mountains, had killed off all the deer, elk, and antelope; and at the beginning of the winter found themselves without their usual stores of dried meat, and with nothing to depend on.

(389) except the scanty supplies in the government storehouse. These were ridiculously inadequate to the wants of twenty-five hundred people, and food could be issued to them only in dribbles quite insufficient to sustain life. The men devoted themselves with the utmost faithfulness to hunting, killing birds, rabbits, prairie-dogs, rats, anything that had life; but do the best they might, the people began to starve. The very old and the very young were the first to perish; after that, those who were weak and sickly, and at last some even among the strong and hardy. News of this suffering was sent East, and Congress ordered appropriations to relieve the distress; but the supplies had to be freighted in wagons for one hundred and fifty or two hundred miles before they were available. If the Blackfeet had been obliged to depend on the supplies authorized by the Indian Bureau, the whole tribe might have perished, for the red tape methods of the Government are not adapted to prompt and efficient action in times of emergency. Happily, help was nearer at hand. The noble people of Montana, and the army officers stationed at Fort Shaw, did all they could to get supplies to the sufferers. One or two Montana contractors sent on flour and bacon, on the personal assurance of the newly appointed agent that he would try to have them paid. But it took a long time to get even these supplies to the agency, over roads sometimes half deep in mud, or again rough with great masses of frozen clay; and all the time the people were dying.

During the winter, Major Allen had been appointed agent for the Blackfeet, and he reached the agency in the midst of the worst suffering, and before any effort had been made to relieve it. He has told me a heart-rending story of the frightful suffering which he found among these helpless people.

In his efforts to learn exactly what was their condition, Major Allen one day went into twenty-three houses and

(391) lodges to see for himself just what the Indians had to eat. In only two of these homes did he find anything in the shape of food. In one house a rabbit was boiling in a pot. The man had killed it that morning, and it was being cooked for a starving child. In another lodge, the hoof of a steer was cooking, - only the hoof, - to make soup for the family. Twenty-three lodges Major Allen visited that day, and the little rabbit and the steer's hoof were all the food he found. "And then," he told me,

with tears in his eyes, "I broke down. I could go no further. To see so much misery, and feel myself utterly powerless to relieve it, was more than I could stand."

Major Allen had calculated with exactest care the supplies on hand, and at this time was issuing one-seventh rations. The Indians crowded around the agency buildings and begged for food. Mothers came to the windows and held up their starving babies that the sight of their dull, pallid faces, their shrunken limbs, and their little bones sticking through their skins might move some heart to pity. Women brought their young daughters to the white men in the neighborhood, and said, "Here, you may have her, if you will feed her; I want nothing for myself; only let her have enough to eat, that she may not die." One day, a deputation of the chiefs came to Major Allen, and asked him to give them what he had in his storehouses. He explained to them that it must be some time before the supplies could get there, and that only by dealing out what he had with the greatest care could the people be kept alive until provisions came. But they said: "Our women and children are hungry, and we are hungry. Give us what you have, and let us eat once and be filled. Then we will die content; we will not beg any more." He took them into the storehouse, and showed them just what food he had, - how much flour, how much bacon, how much rice, coffee, sugar, and so on through the list - and then told them

(382) that if this was issued all at once, there was no hope for them, they would surely die, but that he expected supplies by a certain day. "And," said he, "if they do not come by that time, you shall come in here and help yourselves. That I promise you." They went away satisfied.

Meanwhile, the supplies were drawing near. The officer in command of Fort Shaw had supplied fast teams to hurry on a few loads to the agency, but the roads were so bad that the wagon trains moved with appalling slowness. At length, however, they had advanced so far that it was possible to send out light teams, to meet the heavily laden ones, and bring in a few sacks of flour and bacon; and every little helped. Gradually the suffering was relieved, but the memory of that awful season of famine will never pass from the minds of those who witnessed it.

There is a record of between four and five hundred Indians who died of hunger at this time, and this includes only those who were buried in the immediate neighborhood of the agency and for whom coffins were made. It is probable that nearly as many more died in the camps on other creeks, but this is mere conjecture. It is no exaggeration to say, however, that from one-quarter to one-third of the Piegan tribe starved to death during that winter and the following spring.

Indian and White in the Northwest by L.B. Palladino, S.J., Baltimore, 1894:

(193) Chapter XXVII. St. Peter's Mission, Concluded. - Starvation among the Piegans; Schools, etc. -

The year 1863-64, from fall to early summer, was an incredibly sad and melancholy one for the Piegans, one-third of the whole tribe perishing from starvation. That we do not exaggerate, is evident from the official Report of David Urquhart, Jr., who, in the summer of 1864, was sent by Governor Crosby to investigate the facts in the matter, and by whom the following figures were taken from the Agency rolls. "In August, 1863," says the Report, "the heads of families that drew rations from the Agency represented 3144 souls; while on the corresponding day of 1864 the number to whom rations were issued was 3381. In reality," adds the Report, "the number of Indians does not probably exceed 3000 at the present date." Whence the difference of probably even more than one-third? "The mortality among them," declares Mr. Urquhart in the same Report, "has been ten times as great as it should be in the absence of any contagious disease." Out of

Little Crane's family of fourteen, six died. Little Bull counted six dead, out of a family of nine, and so on of all the rest, there being (193) few, if any families at all in the whole tribe, that did not lament one or more members who had died of starvation.

Father Prando was among them most of this time, and his heart could not bear up under the harrowing scenes of which he was a witness, and which no human pen could describe. What a sad, melancholy spectacle to see, a whole people tottering to their graves from sheer exhaustion for want of something to eat!

Two pounds of meat and about two pounds of flour made up a week's allowance for each adult and all the sustenance they had. Occasionally some did not even get that much, or rather that little, in two weeks. The small pittance was soon devoured, lasting barely two days, and for the rest of the week they had to feed on air and wind. Those who were strong enough, during the winter scoured the neighboring ranges, and lived for a time on cattle that had died from exhaustion or disease. With the approach of warmer weather, the cattle ceased to die, and whatever meat had been secured from cattle that had perished in the winter, became too foul and putrid for use.

Having had occasion, as will directly appear, to visit their tribe, scarcely a month after Mr. Urquhart, we had thus also an opportunity not only to verify the correctness of that gentleman's report, but also to see for ourselves some of the effects of the famine. Nor was there need of any medical eye to discover them, as they were still but too strikingly visible in the gaunt, thin forms, that made of a number of the young and old so many shockingly emaciated skeletons and ghost-like shadows.

But whence this desperate and most inhuman state of affairs in a country of plenty, among most generous people and under the most liberal government on earth? The greediness of the frontier man, the dishonesty of government officials and the cabals of scheming politicians will have to answer for that. By these three combined together, the Blackfeet were confined to a barren country, utterly unfit to support human

(194) life, not even of an Indian, who can live on almost anything, but straight air alone. The real condition, besides, of these poor wretches, was time and again, grossly misrepresented to the Department at Washington. The worthy in charge at this time, had stated in his annual Report that these Indians "were cultivating 800 acres of land and were in a fair way to become self-supporting;" whereas, in stern reality, not as many as ten acres were cultivated, and "there is no evidence," declares Urquhart in his Report to Governor Crosby, "that they ever did any more." And there being besides, "no game of any kind in this section," to quote Urquhart's Report once more, "the Piegan were thus wholly dependent for every mouthful of food on the Government rations." Under these circumstances, how could the general Government at Washington make timely provisions for wants, the existence of which was thus palliated by the officials in charge and on the spot?

Population of the Blackfeet, Blood and Piegan tribes according to the Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1883 to 1885, inclusive:

1883. ----- 8,000. 1883. ----- 4,500. 1884. ----- 2,300.
1885. ----- 3,000.