Viet Cong at Wounded Knee by Woody Kipp
University of Nebraska Press

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Branding

1

I, Woody Kipp, Natoos Sina (Sun Chief), survived on bull elk meat for a few days when I was two months old. In mid-December 1945 the snow piled deep, the drifts towered, and then came the wind. The deep snows of northern Montana are legendary, and the wind can roar off the east slope of the Continental Divide at more than a hundred miles per hour. High in the reaches of Glacier National Park is an alpine lake from which the bull elk comes forth, shaking his horns and creating the swift-moving storms that rake the Blackfeet homeland. The Pikuni Blackfeet – we still have some who speak the mother tongue – know the elk as *ponokah stumiks*. The Elk Nation is represented in the medicine bundles of the Blackfeet.

Just above the Blackfeet agency town of Browning, Montana, the wind sometimes lifts empty railroad flatcars off the track and hurls them down the embankment. Constant wind is a way of life for the Pikuni Blackfeet. The old-timers say the Great Mystery sings in the wind and they compose their songs by listening to it blow.

Wind, deep snow, and bitter cold. Blackfoot Country.

My adopted folks, Joe and Isabell Kipp, lived on Cut Bank Creek in the approximate heart of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. They didn't have a car in 1945.

Although the name Kipp grows from Germanic roots, it has been a part of the Blackfoot Confederacy for a few generations.[1] Some Blackfeet are Kipps by blood, some by adoption, and some by marriage. Joe W. Kipp, my adopted father, was a full-blood Pikuni Blackfoot Indian. (The *W* in his name distinguishes him from another Joe Kipp, a well-known Indian trader who was alive when my adopted father was born). The Pikuni are one of three divisions of the ancient Blackfoot Confederacy. According to historians they were a fierce group, fighting with all the tribes in the northern plains region once they acquired the gun and the horse. The Blackfoot Confederacy controlled the northern plains from the Yellowstone River, which runs through the current Montana city of Billings, north into the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. It was a pretty good-sized ranch we had, and there weren't any fences on it. Modern men can only guess at that kind of freedom. Like nearly all present-day reservations, the Pikuni Blackfeet Reservation is miniscule compared to the tribe's landholdings when the Europeans arrived.

James Kipp – father of the Indian trader Joe Kipp – apparently came out of Canada about 1830 in the employ of the fur trade. He married a Mandan woman, the granddaughter of Four Bears. Their son, Joe Kipp, became an Indian trader and married a Blackfoot woman. Joe Kipp, described as one of the "Merchant Princes of the Upper Missouri," traded with the three Blackfoot bands, the Pikuni, the Kainah (commonly known as the Bloods, located in Canada just across the border from the Blackfeet Reservation), and the Blackfoot proper, the Siksika (who live east of the Canadian city of Calgary). We speak a common language and have a common culture; we are leaves of the same sacred tree.

Because of their avowed ferocity toward other tribes and whites, the U.S. Army marked the Pikuni for slaughter in 1870. The slaughter, known as Baker's Massacre, took place on the Marias River on January 23, 1870, a short distance south of the present town of Shelby, Montana.[2] More than one version exists as to why and how the U.S. Army targeted the Pikuni band of Chief Heavy Runner for military action, an action that culminated in the death of more than 170 Pikuni, mainly women and children and elderly, while the able-bodied men were hunting buffalo near Sweet Grass Hills (a misnomer, since the true Blackfeet designation for the spot was Sweet Pine Hills) in the dead of winter. When the men returned they found their families had been killed and burned on funeral pyres by the army men.

Joe Kipp, by the time of the massacre, had traded with the Blackfoot tribes for years. He had acted as guide for the army in finding the Blackfoot camp that was slaughtered. Anguished over the massacre, which he did not participate in and did not condone, Joe Kipp adopted some of the children who had survived by hiding. One of those children was my adopted father's father, John Kipp (Night Gun), and that's how my full-blood adopted father came to have a Germanic surname. He was a Heavy Runner.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century John Kipp became widely known on the Blackfeet reservation as Cut Bank John Kipp, being the first of the Blackfeet to live permanently on Cut Bank Creek. After his adoption Cut Bank John lived and worked around the trading post, became quite wealthy, and built a large, fancy two-story house on Cut Bank Creek. I spent time in that house as a child.

His son, Joe Kipp, and Joe's wife Isabell lived the better part of their lives on a river bottom, which was the land allotted by the U.S. government on Cut Bank Creek. Joe Kipp, whose Indian name was Eagle Shoe, was a tall, dark, full-blood Blackfeet Indian. He used to break horses sixteen at a time in his younger years; scotch-hobbling them (tying a hind foot up to keep them somewhat quiet) and then getting on one after another until they were rideable. Eagle Shoe's brand was Triangle Bar Z (the brand is registered in my name today). Isabell was a half-blood; her father, George Cook, was a white man of whom I know nearly nothing. She and hundreds of others were schooled at the old Catholic Family Mission, built on land given to the Catholics by White Calf. Isabell was in fact my biological mother's aunt, so I was a blood part of the family into which I was adopted. I've been a Kipp since I was nine days old.

I am Blackfeet through my mother's blood. She was a Wolverine on her mother's side and a Munro on her father's side. Hugh Munro was one of the first white men to live permanently with the people of the Blackfoot Confederacy, coming among them in 1815 as a goodwill ambassador for the Hudson's Bay Company (beaver pelts lured the Hudson's Bay men out onto the western plains of North America). Hugh Munro could have lived quite a comfortable life had he chosen to return to Three Rivers near Montreal, but he chose instead to run buffalo over the plains at forty miles per hour. He remained with the Pikuni Blackfeet until his death in 1896 at the age of ninety-eight.

All I know of my biological father is his name. He left not long after I was born and never returned. His name was Roger Van Ness – that Dutch- or German-sounding name doesn't mean much to me. I was raised in the Pikuni Blackfeet world. I'm a powwow dancer, and it'd be awful hard to dance in wooden shoes.

When I was adopted in late 1945, Joe Kipp was fifty-seven years old, Isabell was fifty-two, and they had already raised a family. Three sons and two daughters had survived, and a couple of others died in infancy, which was fairly common in a time marked by whooping cough, diphtheria, and other diseases for which there were no vaccines. Though I never knew them, I heard my mom and pop talk of Norman and Elizabeth, who had died in infancy.

Their oldest daughter, Aurise, was my godmother and became a World War II veteran. She represented that generation of Blackfeet who had been thoroughly brainwashed by white society as children.[3] She found little to redeem about our Native culture. The schoolteachers on the reservation, the churches, and the people of the previous generation who had been brainwashed, all effectively encouraged her to emulate white women. She married a half-blood whose father owned and operated a gas station and grocery store on the reservation. With most of the reservation people living on welfare, being married to someone associated with local commerce was undoubtedly satisfying to her. She and her husband often worked on large ranches in Montana; he served as a ranch foreman, and she cooked for the ranch hands. Aurise died in March of 1998 after lying in the Veterans Hospital in Columbia Falls, Montana, for several years. Her mind remained clear nearly to the end.

Katherine was next in age after Aurise. She was psychic and her spirits were something we feared, something to make one deathly afraid of the dark. Katherine sadly lived an extremely hardscrabble life with a mixed-blood husband, John "Jack" Hirst, who was an alcoholic. She died in a head-on collision with tourists in the summer of 1973. The Hirst name would become very well known in the Cut Bank area after the mysterious and contentious death of their son, Clayton, in the Glacier County jail in March of 1975. A medicine man, in a ceremony, said he died at the hands of three white men who had entered his cell. It could not be proven in a white Montana court, however. *Rolling Stone* magazine considered doing a story on the death of Clayton Hirst but later declined to do so. One morning, about a year after Clayton's death, I saw a very bright spot in the azure sky to the northeast of where I was living in Heart Butte. I learned later during a spirit ceremony, which was presided over by Sam Spotted Eagle, that the bright spot had been my nephew's message that he was okay.

My oldest adopted brother was John Kipp – Big John. He *was* big, standing six foot three and weighing about 230 pounds. He always stayed in shape. When a man is that large and fit, he's dangerous. He trapped many beaver, one time catching twenty-six in a single night. He served in the marine infantry on Iwo Jima and Guam during World War II. Once, he was commended for carrying a Japanese soldier up a hill to a command center for interrogation during the battle for Iwo Jima. When my pop told this story to his friends outside of a grocery story in Browning, they wanted to know Big John's Indian name. He had never been named in the Indian way, but an old woman who was a friend of the family immediately called him Kiyotokan, Bear Head, after an uncle that Big John had followed around as a child. Names in the old way carried weight. Big John was recalled to active duty during the Korean War but did not have to leave the states; he spent his time at Camp Pendleton in California. Upon release from active duty, he returned to Cut Bank Creek.

While he held to many of the hunting and gathering ways he had been raised with, Big John was also a progressive who seemed to have no trouble using and adapting aspects of white society that he found useful. In the 1950s, the government sponsored a farm and ranch seminar for veterans. John was practically the only Indian on the reservation who took the farm training; some other Indians went the ranching route. My folks owned a few hundred acres of rangeland that had been allotted to them and their children. John used a loan through the tribal credit program to buy a secondhand tractor and plow. He broke the rangeland into farmland and started raising wheat and barley, successfully. In 1956 he bought a brand-new black Ford Fairlane, followed a year later by a new two-tone green International four-wheel drive flatbed 3/4-ton truck, one of the first four-wheel drive vehicles on the Blackfeet Reservation. Big John would be making close to a hundred thousand a year by the time he died. Occasionally on a weekend he would go into Browning and drink in the bars. Because of his size and status as a former marine, he became the favorite target of reservation toughs. A couple of times they ganged up on him and gave him some rough and tumble, but one-on-one I never heard of them getting the best of him. Fighting runs in our family.

A few years younger than John, my adopted brother Max became the 1955 Montana State Golden Gloves middleweight champion in boxing. He made it as far as the nationals in Chicago before being beaten by a black boxer. The coach of the Cut Bank Boxing Club, Larry Minckler, once saw Max knock the tar out of somebody. He convinced my folks of Max's potential as a boxer and apparently also spoke of the educational advantages Max would gain from attending a white school as opposed to the reservation high school. At the school, which I also attended, in the border town of Cut Bank, Max won a Heisey Award, became a football, track, and boxing standout, and was offered a boxing scholarship to Gonzaga University in the state of Washington. He married a white girl from Cut Bank, but her folks weren't happy with their daughter being married to an Indian, so the marriage didn't last long. After quitting college in his second year and returning to the reservation, Max continued boxing and started working on oil drilling rigs. At a large oil field outside Cut Bank, which has produced millions of gallons of oil since its discovery a half century ago, Max worked his way up to become a driller, a kind of boss of a drilling rig. Once while working in extremely cold weather – Cut Bank is often the coldest spot in the nation – high on a drilling rig, Max mashed his fingers between pieces of moving heavy metal. For six months he wore a fan-shaped cast on his hand while the bones healed. He had received an offer to turn pro boxer, but the drilling rig accident ended that hope. Max is the only member of my family alive today. He lives in Browning, and when I go home to visit, I sometimes stop at his house and we visit. He is twelve years my senior and knows stories from Cut Bank Creek that I haven't heard before. Sometimes we visit long. We're two, and we are left.

Quentin was ten years older than I, standing between Big John and Max in size – about six foot one, 190 pounds. Quentin was also a boxer and a street fighter; he and some of the locals would often get into fights with flyboys from the airbase outside of Cut Bank. He died at the age of twenty-two in 1958 from lung cancer, never having smoked a cigarette. At that time little was known about secondhand smoke. My folks both smoked.

I was adopted into a fighting family, a proud, complicated Blackfeet family that stood with one foot in the old ways and the other in the acculturated American ways. The profound changes experienced by the Blackfeet in the early reservation years reverberated deeply within individual families such as mine, affecting the relationships between fathers and sons. Apparently a deep attachment bound father to son in the pre-colonial days. A story in the ethnographic writings of the Blackfoot peoples tells of a man who would not give his son up to death; he carried the remains of the child with him for years in a travois behind his horse.

This tenderness was foreign to my father, who had turned to cowboying after the buffalo culture was gone, and who had grown up immersed in the toughness of the American West. Such toughness or absence of sympathy seems to have become part of the western Indian male – and sometimes female – persona. Once when Big John was twelve, he and Max were returning from school on horseback, riding a big black gelding named Buick. Buick stepped into a badger hole and fell, hurting the boys badly. They were still crying when they came off the steep cutbank where the trail led down to the creek. Pop, watering horses on the far side of the creek, spied his sons crying. Rather than offering sympathy and comfort, he harshly ordered them to get to the house.

My pop, like so many Indians then and now, had *become* a cowboy. And something vital departed when that happened. The similarities between raising domestic cattle and hunting buffalo for Blackfeet pale when their differences are considered. The rituals associated with the running and killing of the buffalo were many; the horse was sacred; the buffalo was sacred; and the Grandmother, the Earth Spirit, was sacred. Cowboys are tough and work long, hard hours and ride dangerous horses for little pay, but they lack ritual, a sense of being part of something larger. The rituals of the Blackfoot Confederacy and other buffalo-hunting peoples offered a sense of spiritual connectedness. Cattle kept the body alive for my Blackfeet family and others, but something essential was gone. Something existential. Something ontological. Something necessary.

We survived, then and now, our toughness not only making us prone to fighting and drinking but also helping us find ways to endure and to cope. When Joe and Isabell took me in at nine days of age in that cold

October of 1945, the deep snow and drifting wind made it impossible to travel even on horseback. As soon as the wind abated, my father and Big John, who had recently returned from active duty, saddled horses and went to hunt. They happened upon two bull elk that had followed Cut Bank Creek out of the mountains and onto the plains. (When the elk and deer can no longer get good feed near the mountains, hunger will usually drive them onto the plains. The animals will regularly follow one of the creeks that come out of the fastnesses of the mountains – Badger Creek, Two Medicine River, Cut Bank Creek, Birch Creek. These creeks are lined with cottonwood forests along their banks as they wend their way east to join the Big Muddy, the Missouri.) With the snowdrifts too deep to ride cross-country to Browning, some fifteen miles away, my diet those first days consisted solely of bull elk meat. My adopted mom would first chew the meat into a fine consistency and then feed it to me. In three or four days the ride to town was possible, and I once again had canned milk.

The knowledge that bull elk meat kept me alive as an infant has always been a part of my consciousness. I tend to see elk differently than others do, even if I have hunted and killed elk for food – all cow elk though and not the bull elk that helped me survive as an infant. One surely wouldn't want to kill one's medicine person. If I had screwed up by doing so, the old Pikuni would have said "he shit in his medicine sack."