

## 2. The People

### A Brief History

From the lakeshores and prairies to the rocky peaks of the Continental Divide, the Crown of the Continent has been home to human beings for at least 10,000 years.

Traditionally, historians said these mountains

were rarely, if ever, used by people before the coming of European settlers. Archaeological studies in the past 25 years have debunked that myth. Moreover, many ancient spiritual and cultural connections between the land and local tribal members remain intact today. This is another special feature of the Crown of the Continent: few places in the Rocky Mountains remain so closely tied to native traditions. For many, the Crown of the Continent remains “sacred geography.”

Over those 100 centuries, different native cultures came and went, as the climate and ecosystems changed. Places like the campground at St. Mary Lake (where vacationers now park their recreational vehicles) have been used for thousands of years by people who hunted, fished, and collected plants.

The oldest, indisputable human evidence in North America is 12,500 years old, although humans may have walked the continent as long ago as 30,000 years. While the record is sometimes sketchy, archaeologists believe people have dwelled in the Crown of the Continent for perhaps 11,000 years.



People arrived soon after the mountains were free from ice and able to support large prey.

The mysterious Clovis people roamed the prairies more than 10,000 years ago, using thrusting spears to hunt prehistoric ani-

mals like mammoth and horse. They roamed the east side of the Crown of the Continent, as Ice Age glaciers melted from the high country. Clovis artifacts have been found on the east side of the Crown of the Continent, at Belly River and Waterton Lakes. Unfortunately, the history of the Clovis people is not entirely clear and is the matter of some debate among archaeologists.

When ice finally melted out of the high passes, people crossed over the mountains from the west, as well. The ancestors of modern Native Americans are believed to have arrived over the Bering Land Bridge from Asia before the last major ice advance. These Asiatic people soon roamed across North America.

Bighorn sheep were an important prey animal for the people who lived in the Crown of the Continent 5,000 years ago. They hunted the sheep by making brush fences and corrals at mountain passes and along sheep trails. The animals were ambushed along these trails, or driven into the fences, where they could be killed with throwing spears. Technologies

such as the throwing stick—or *atlatl*—and spears with replaceable tips made their hunts even more deadly.

Another favorite prey of prehistoric hunters was the now-extinct mountain bison subspecies. Hunters drove small herds of mountain bison into natural and human-made traps. Thin ice at Waterton Lakes was one



such trap, as were marshy quagmires at Pine Butte Swamp. Later, hunters learned to pursue the larger prairie bison on a greater scale, by driving them over cliffs. Some cliffs, called *pishkuns* in

Blackfoot, have several meters of bison bones piled at their foot, representing the efforts of thousands of years of hunting.

Prehistoric people did not rely solely on mammals for food. They also stretched nets across streams to catch fish. Lake outlets were popular places to live, catch and prepare fish, dry meat, and gather plants.

As people learned to cook plants, they became an increasingly important source of calories. Archaeologists estimate that 20-40% of the diet of Crown of the Continent natives came from plants, depending on the season. Camas, biscuitroot, and balsamroot were staples. Huckleberries, saskatoons, and other fruit were also important. Besides providing vitamins and carbohydrates, plants were also important sources of medicines.

Aboriginal people learned to preserve meat by making pemmican about 4,800 years

ago, marking another important technological advance that greatly increased the mobility of these pedestrian nomads. Prehistoric people covered vast distances afoot, even walking back and forth over the Continental Divide on snowshoe during the mid-winter. Dogs were the only domesticated beasts of burden. Families kept dozens of dogs, which dragged their belongings aboard platforms called *travois*. Trade was conducted over networks stretching hundreds of miles.

An elusive, but important, feature of the Crown of the Continent is the Old North Trail, a prehistoric route dating 10,000 years or more. The Old North Trail runs north-south along the Rocky Mountain Front, in Montana and Alberta. Travelers on the Old North Trail could find relatively easy walking and reliable sources of prey animals, fresh water, firewood, and protection from the severe storms of the prairies.

The route, changing over the years and never exactly pinpointed, most likely connected with other trade routes, creating a pedestrian network crisscrossing North America. Rock art drawn by Hopi Indians from the American Southwest has been found near Banff National Park, Alberta, dated perhaps 1,000 years ago. Today, remnants of the Old North Trail are marked with teepee rings and the tracks of both dog- and horse-drawn travois. Staple plants, such as camas, were planted along the Old North Trail long ago, either accidentally or purposely, and still grow there today.

The bow and arrow appears in the archaeological record about 1,800 years ago, again changing hunting patterns. While tribes elsewhere in North America developed complex farming and irrigation systems, the climate of the Crown of the Continent did not encourage cultivation. Instead, hunting, fishing, and gathering remained the means of survival. This tradition stretched back thou-

sands of years and is perhaps the longest example of a sustainable economy in this region's history.

Today, the Crown of the Continent is most closely associated with two tribes: the K'tunaxa bands (the Kootenai in Montana or Kootenay in Canada) and the Piikanii tribe of the Nitsitappi (the Blackfoot Nation).

The K'tunaxa people roamed what is now the Idaho panhandle, southern British Columbia, western Montana, and over the mountains to the western prairies of Alberta and Montana. There were seven bands of K'tunaxa. They are all part of a distinct language family with no close linguistic relations. Although the K'tunaxa roamed the plains as well as the mountains, they were essentially a mountain culture, using resources such as caribou and fish and developing technology such as double-prowed canoes.

The Great Plains and the Rocky Mountain Front are commonly associated with the three Nitsitappi tribes, or the Blackfoot Nation. These are the northern Blackfoot (Siksika), the Bloods (Kainai), and the Piegan (Piikanii). The Nitsitappi language is part of the larger Algonquin language family. The Nitsitappi economy (and indeed its entire culture) circled around the plains bison.

The Continental Divide formed a permeable boundary between the Nitsitappi and the K'tunaxa cultures. Contact between tribes—be it trade, warfare, or other social intermingling—was frequent, but not frequent enough to entirely blend their cultures.

The Rocky Mountain Front is a powerful venue in the spiritual traditions of these tribes. In particular, Chief Mountain and Heart Butte are important spiritual landmarks in the Blackfoot tradition. For thousands of years, tribal members have visited high peaks on these and other mountains to seek visions and spiritual guidance. There are seventy-nine known vision quest sites in Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. Several of these traditional sites are still used today.

In addition, some 120 plant species of the Rocky Mountain Front are still collected and used by tribal members for both food and medicine. Few other places in the modern Rocky Mountains still have these kinds of traditional uses.

These ancient traditions faced sweeping changes, starting about 500 years ago. The changes came from the Southwest and from the East.

Even before the 1490s, Europeans began visiting North America's Atlantic Coast. Europeans inadvertently intro-

duced devastating diseases to North America, diseases against which Native Americans had no natural resistance. European colonization of the Atlantic Seaboard also displaced tribe after tribe, who in turn displaced other tribes farther west. These ripple effects rolled across North America. Such social disruptions often preceded actual European settlement. One well-documented example is a smallpox epidemic that swept the Great Plains in 1781, killing perhaps half the Blackfoot Nation. Other disease outbreaks occurred earlier, as well.



Another cultural change for the native people of the Crown of the Continent galloped in from the south. In the late 1600s, Indians of



northeastern portion of the Crown of the Continent. The Atsina (Gros Ventre), of the Great Plains, at times wintered along the Rocky Mountain Front. The territory of the Salish, of the Columbia Basin, also included the southwestern part of the Crown of the Continent. After the arrival of horses, other tribes, including the Nez Perce of Idaho and Oregon, crossed the Crown of the Continent to hunt plains bison.

Horses, firearms, and smallpox were the first of many sweeping changes to come to the Crown of the Continent. Anglo-Americans, themselves, arrived toward the end of the 1700s.

The first Anglo to explore the Crown of the Continent was probably Peter Fidler, a surveyor for the Hudson's Bay Company. Fidler described Chief Mountain in January, 1793. LeBlanc and LeGasse, two explorers working for the famous Canadian surveyor David Thompson, visited Waterton Lakes with K'tunaxa guides about 1800.

In the early 1800s, the United States and England were in a race to discover a mythical Northwest Passage across North America. In 1806, U.S. Army Captain Meriwether Lewis (of the Lewis and Clark Expedition) visited the

the American Southwest began obtaining horses from the Spanish. Horses were swiftly adopted by northern tribes, as well. Natives of the Crown of the Continent obtained horses around 1730, first the Kootenai and then the Blackfoot. Horses allowed the people to roam over much larger distances, have larger teepees, and amass more material goods. It dramatically changed their culture, in particular their styles of hunting and warfare.

After the 1730s, the Blackfoot Nation controlled vast portions of the prairie of what would become Alberta and Montana. Historians believe that the Blackfoot Nation obtained firearms earlier than neighboring tribes, tipping the balance of power in their favor. Once armed and on horseback, the fiercely defensive Blackfoot contained the Kootenai in the areas west of the Continental Divide, closing passes in 1810 and patrolling them through 1850.

While the Crown of the Continent is most closely associated with the K'tunaxa and the Blackfoot, other tribes consider the Crown of the Continent a part of their homelands, as well. In particular, the Stoney Indians (of the Assiniboine People) used the



Crown of the Continent on the way home, after reaching the Pacific Ocean. While Capt. William Clark explored the Yellowstone River, Lewis explored the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers, crossing the Continental Divide along an ancient Indian route at what is now called Lewis and Clark Pass. Lewis then explored north along the Rocky Mountain Front on the Old North Trail, in the vicinity of the current town of

Browning.

Later, David Thompson, working for the North West Company, crossed the Canadian Rockies. He then canoed down the Kootenay River from the North, describing Crown of the Continent landmarks, including the Tobacco Plains and Flathead Lake, around 1810.

These probing journeys opened the Crown of the Continent to fur traders. Tribal members became even more active traders, increasingly involved in a European-style economy. Furs were traded for firearms, pots, knives, alcohol, and other goods. Traders for the Hudson's Bay Company, and later the American Fur Company and others, made both allies and enemies of members of native tribes, often hiring natives to trap furs.

Christian missionaries, like Father Pierre Jean De Smet, were the next to explore this country. The "Black Robes" set up a network of missions throughout the wilderness. Prospectors searching for gold probed the Crown of the Continent as early as 1850. Miners were inspired by big strikes, such as the one at Last Chance Gulch, near Helena, Montana. In the 1850s, James Noty explored the Crown of the Continent for the Pacific Railway Expedition. He was the first white man to record a visit to St. Mary Lake.

One remarkable expedition through the Crown of the Continent was the Palliser Expedition, sponsored by the Royal Geographic Society and led by Capt. John Palliser in 1857. In 1858, Lt. Thomas Blakiston split off from the main expedition and entered North Kootenay Pass, crossing the Continental Divide and traveling south into what is now British Columbia and Montana. He eventually arrived at the Tobacco Plains, where he met a tribe of Kootenay who told him about South Kootenay Pass. He crossed back over the mountains via this pass, de-

scending Blakiston Creek, to arrive at Waterton Lakes.

During much of the 1800s, the Crown of the Continent was a disputed zone between England and the United States, particularly on the west side of the Continental Divide. Although America and Great Britain had been at peace since the war of 1812, the international line between Canada and the United States across the Great Plains and up to the Rocky Mountains was in dispute until 1818, while the boundary over the Rocky Mountains and across the Columbia Basin remained in dispute for decades after that.

In 1846, the two nations finally agreed to follow the 49th Parallel over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. From 1857 to



1862, British and American survey parties cleared a swath along the line from the Rockies to the Pacific. A second joint British and American party completed the survey of the International Boundary along the 49th Parallel from Lake of the Woods west to Waterton, from 1872 to 1874. (That arbitrary strip of deforestation still slices across the Crown of the Continent. In more recent years, this swath has been cleared with herbicides and hand tools, rather than axes, but there have been many discussions about letting the swath grow back.)

Another major change in the Crown of the Continent was the advent of the livestock industry. Ranchers herded cattle and sheep into the Crown in the 1860s and 1870s, taking advantage of the excellent feed offered by the bunchgrass prairies of the western Great Plains. Partly to make way for cattle, and for both their meat and hides, the bison were



systematically eradicated. The slaughter of the bison was disastrous for native people and wildlife alike.

By 1883, only a few hundred bison remained of the millions that once roamed Great Plains. As a result of the loss of their traditional food supply, the Blackfoot Nation suffered hunger and disease. When a harsh winter in 1886-1887 killed huge numbers of the white ranchers' cattle, the governments cut back on relief food supplies to the native people, making their situation even worse.

With the eradication of the bison, and as more and more traditional hunting territories were lost to ranches and mining communities, the tribes eventually signed treaties with the governments of the United States and Canada. These treaties increasingly confined the native people to reservations or reserves and left them dependent on the U.S. and Canadian governments. Prominent local treaties include the Hell's Gate Treaty between the Kootenai

and the United States in 1855 and the Lone Bull Treaty between the Blackfoot Nation, other plains tribes, and the United States, also that year. In 1877, Canada and the Blackfoot Nations signed Treaty Number 7.

The Crown of the Continent's remote location long delayed intensive settlement. Only products that could walk (like cattle) or be inexpensively carried by steamboat (like gold dust) could be exported economically. In the late 1800s, however, the completion of the railroads changed that by providing an economical way to transport crops and natural resources from the Crown of the Continent to distant markets.

Perhaps no one person changed the Crown as much as Canadian-American capitalist James J. Hill, who helped finance and build the Great Northern Railroad and Canadian National Railway. Workers from Asia and Europe toiled on the railroads for years, connecting the Crown of the Continent to Pacific ports at Seattle and Portland and to interior cities, such as Chicago and Minneapolis. The Great Northern crested Marias Pass in 1891. The Canadian Pacific Railway crossed Crowsnest Pass in 1898.



The completion of the railroads on both sides of the international line, along with homesteading legislation and the distribution of land through massive railroad land grants, opened the Crown of the Continent to waves of ordinary settlers.

Farmers began to homestead river valleys such as the Elk, the Old Man, the Swan, the Flathead, and the Clark Fork. Religious minorities were also drawn to the opportuni-

ties of the Crown of the Continent. Mennonite, Hutterite, and Mormon agricultural communities were established along the Rocky Mountain Front, near towns like Dupuyer and Cardston, where they still farm. While some agricultural areas (such as the Flathead Valley and irrigated segments of the prairies) thrived under agriculture, the mountain portions of the Crown of the Continent are poorly suited for cultivation and were left unplowed.

Towns cropped up near prime farmland and along railroad lines and spurs. The railroads also brought an influx of prospectors, who probed the mountains for coal, metals, and oil. Some of the first oil wells in North America were drilled near Kintla, Waterton Lakes, and the Many Glacier Valley around 1900-1905.



The Crown of the Continent was the site of one of the first oil booms in Montana and Alberta, but failed to produce marketable quantities of oil for long. Most mineral prospectors failed to find enough ore to support large-scale mining operations in the Crown, except for the

extensive coal deposits that were developed in the Crowsnest Pass area. (Today, coal mining in the region is restricted to the area near Elkford, north of Fernie, B.C.) Rudimentary lumbering also began in this period, initially providing railroad ties and beams for mine tunnels and eventually supplying building materials locally and internationally.

Besides allowing products to be shipped



out of the Crown of the Continent, railroads also provided a way for urban visitors to visit this fabled landscape. As Canadian Pacific Railway president W.C. Van Horne said, “Since we cannot export the scenery, we will import the sightseers.”

One sightseer was a rich, well-connected New Yorker named

George Bird Grinnell. A hunter, conservationist, and the editor of *Field and Forest* magazine, Grinnell coined the phrase “Crown of the Continent” to describe this land. The name has stuck, and the land has continued to inspire efforts to conserve and enjoy this mountain world. Grinnell’s efforts culminated in the creation of Glacier National Park in 1910.



North of the border, Fredrick Godsall had done the same for Waterton. Godsall, a wealthy Alberta cattleman, championed the protection of the Waterton Lakes area. In 1895, a 140 square kilometer (54 square mile) area was set aside by the Canadian federal government as a Dominion Forest Park.

# Crown Demographics

A key feature of the Crown of the Continent is the relatively low human population. In a 1990 study, researcher Peter Thorton found the Montana portion of the Crown of the Continent had 237,886 people. That's a population density of 11 people per square mile, compared to a U.S. average of 70 per square mile. This population is also more rural than the U.S. average.

Half of the people in the Crown of the Continent live in towns, half in the country. In the rest of the U.S., four people live in the cities for every one in the country. Many in the Crown of the Continent live in towns of fewer than 500 people, while only a small portion of people live in such small towns nationwide.

Larger towns near or within the Crown of the Continent include Kalispell (15,000),

Great Falls, and Missoula in Montana (both with about 57,000). Whitefish, Columbia Falls, Polson, Choteau, and Dupuyer all have fewer than 5,000 people. In Canada, Fernie has about 5,000, while Ft. Macleod, Pincher Creek, Cardston, and Sparwood all have fewer than 5,000. The Municipality of Crowsnest Pass has perhaps 6,500.

The populations of cities can be somewhat misleading, since many residents of the Crown of the Continent live in rural areas immediately outside cities, rather than within city limits.

In total, British Columbia, Alberta, and Montana sprawl over a large portion of North America, but host fewer than 7 million people.

The largest cities near the Crown of the Continent are Calgary, Alberta (850,000) and Spokane, Washington (250,000).

## Sources

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