

DOCUMENT NAME/INFORMANT: GEORGE FIRST RIDER  
THE SIGNIFICANCE AND FUNCTIONS  
OF THE BEAVER IN BLACKFOOT  
CEREMONIALISM

INFORMANT'S ADDRESS: BLOOD RESERVE  
CARDSTON, ALBERTA

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GEORGE FIRST RIDER

George First Rider of the Blood Reserve was born in 1904. He had no formal schooling but became an accomplished horseman and worked for a time on the rodeo circuit. After working as a farmer he ended up in jail as a result of alcoholism and theft. He attributes his reform to his conversion to Christianity.

He prides himself on his ability as a storyteller and on his knowledge of Blood culture, particularly the holy societies many of which he joined as a young man.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Role of the beaver in Blackfoot life and ceremonies.  
George First Rider: Now I am going to tell a story about the beaver. I have told a story about the muskrat. The illustration is the same. The larger tail is the muskrat's tail, the smaller tail is the beaver's tail and now when they exchanged, this exchanging, the word is a new word. A white man will say we traded, the Indian will say we will exchange. Now the beaver offered its tail to his young brother, the muskrat. The beaver thought the muskrat's tail was too heavy for him. The beaver told the muskrat, "Take my tail and give me your tail." This is what he told the muskrat. The beaver told the muskrat, "I will make you up with my tail and you will make me up with your huge tail. We will exchange our tails."

The muskrat agreed to the suggestion, and he was glad to have the tail. He stuck it onto himself. The beaver inserted the tail onto himself flatways. When the muskrat dived he just slapped its tail on the water; when the beaver dived and when its new huge tail slapped on the water the echo sounded like a gunshot. We will go into the bush and we will shout. We will put it like that. We will shout in the bush. When we shout, another one will shout from far away and another one will also shout farther away. How many are we going to hear that are shouting? The echo will be fading away and finally the sound will die off. That is what we call echo.

I (First Rider) don't know if anybody knows the meaning of Ki-Ta-Ko (echo). There is only one Blackfoot Indian, the wisest man that speaks. His name is Heavenly Old Man (White Head Chief) and here on the Blood reserve a man by the name of Over Tipi Design and the other one that also speaks, his name is Weasel Tail. Over Tipi Design speaks the real native language. These people that are great speakers are the ones that tell me stories; they are the ones that spoke the word "echo." In the night, there will a light above the horizon. Somebody will be standing there or he will be walking and another person will be on the ground and he will the man against the light. That is echo. As the beaver's tail is flat, and the sound when he dives, I will illustrate it this way. It sounded like a gunshot. The beaver made a use of the tail that was given to him. The beaver starts to gnaw on trees. It's strange. We will put a stick in the water and it will float downstream, and what the beaver puts in the water will not float away. A beaver will dispose of what he chewed on and the wood will drift away down the river. That is why we find wood that the beavers chewed on along the river shores.

A beaver will chew down a tree and it will crawl underneath the tree that he chewed down and he will raise himself with the tree balancing himself with its tail and he'd walk away on its

hind legs holding the bud of the tree on its shoulder. I (First Rider) saw one. I was watching a beaver carrying a tree into the water. It was a big tree that they carried into the water; three beavers carried the tree. They didn't use the log for anything, it's the branches that they use. Here's how the beavers use their tails. They'll back up to the tree and they'll push their tails underneath the tree and they will lift the log with their tails. Then they will turn around into position and then they'll stand up on their hind legs balancing themselves with their tails. If a beaver is in a hurry he will go into a gallop and he will flip its tail under him and he will slide on it. Lots of people know that the beavers push themselves with their tails but not too far. It's their way of living. So they are carrying the trees into the water. When they leave the tree in the water, the tree is not very big and heavy when they leave it in the water; it will not float away. To make the tide rise the beavers will dive and they will stick their tails into the mud and they'll come up to the surface with a tailful of mud and they'd swim to the dam that they

built and they will brush off the mud on the logs. They use some small sticks amongst the big logs, and they will daub the logs and sticks with the mud. One beaver doesn't do the work alone. Other beaver volunteer to help build the dam and they all work in the construction of the dam. What a strange thing! The west side of the dam is flooded and how is it that the dam doesn't burst open? The dam will not be forced away by the pressure of the water; that is how they work with the tail that was given to them. The muskrat didn't make use of its tail. The beaver was given the tail and he uses it like as if it is his hand. There is another thing. If the beavers wanted to move one of the logs they will swim backwards to it and they shove the tail between the logs and push the log in place with its tail. Lots of people see the beavers while they're at work. The beavers will start to work in the evening and they are still working in the morning. The beavers dug the place so it will be deeper and they used the mud from their digging to plaster the walls of the dam's wooden structure. That is why beaver dams are famous.

The toe nails on the hind feet of beavers are also extracted. They wrapped them in rawhide and they bite them and pull the toe nails out with their teeth and they dried them on sticks. When the beaver toe nails are dry they make rattles out of them. The rattles are attached to the top corners of the smoke flaps of a Beaver Designed Tipi. Now a tipi is Beaver Designed and the proprietor of the tipi will have a beaver skin tipi flag, a beaver tipi flag. I (First Rider) did not see a transferal of a Beaver Designed Tipi, but what I (First Rider) heard that the tipi transferal lasted for four days. The four days are not exactly one full days. The transferal ceremony

will go on for a length of time and transferal ceremony will be adjourned until the next day and so on like that until the fourth day.

The people that sat in the tipi acted like beavers because it is the beaver's lodge and when they go out they will come back in with a piece of stick and they will drop them by the fireplace. Those are the sticks that they gnawed off. The sticks are thrown in the fire, the fireplace. It is called the gnawed off wood. The beaver eats the bark. How can a person eat a gnawed wood? He comes in with the stick and he calls it my gnawed off wood, and he is going to eat it. The fireplace is his mouth. The stick burns up and it just like swallowing the gnawed wood. That is what it means.

Every participant that goes out will take in a piece of wood. It's the same in the Water Bundle transferal. Every participant that goes, he or she comes back in with a piece of wood and the sticks are burned in the fire. The beaver pelt is used for a tipi flag and the toe nails are attached to the top joints of the smoke flaps and when the wind blows they will jingle-jangle-jingle.

The incense burning place, the scraped incense burning place, that is why all the scraped incense burning places are mounded

with the sod that was scraped off. The mounded sod represents a beaver dam. The scraped incense burning place represents a lake and where the sod is mounded is where the dam is built. That is what the scraped incense burning of places are. What the Water Bundle owner uses are different. It's on account of the beaver's work.

Beaver-colored buffaloes are scarce. The Water Bundle Society took the beaver-colored buffalo hide. They had it tanned and they used it for an outer wrapper for their pipe. The beavers are skinned with their tails still on. The fat is taken out from the tail. Before the tails dry out they are stuffed with perfumed plant and then the openings are stitched together. Crushed cedar needles are also put in with the stuffings of the tail. Here's how the cedar needles are crushed. The cedar needles are put on a flat stone and another stone is used to crush them into powder. Then they're put in the beaver tail and the tail is stitched together after it is stuffed and then the beaver tails are dried. The beaver skins are the Water Bundle Society's utility bags.

I (First Rider) mentioned before that Water Bundle Pipe is not the original name for a Water Bundle Pipe. The Medicine Pipes were originally called Medicine Pipes. The Water Bundles were

called utility bags. Later on they were called Water Bundle Pipes. The origin of Water Bundle Pipes will be illustrated in the future. So that is what the Water Bundles are, the utility bags.

Now a Water Bundle owner's whistle, the necklaces are his actually holy necklaces. The beaver teeth, they are not beaded in any various ways, they are quilled. Beads were introduced just lately. The necklaces were mountain peak designed with quills. Black ochre is smeared on the quill work. The beaver teeth on the necklace are smeared with black ochre and then they are wiped off with a clean rawhide. They're shiny when the black ochre is wiped off. The necklace is the Water Bundle owner's precious necklace. The necklaces are fringed where the teeth are. The beaver teeth are transferable also with songs.

The women wear the beaver claw wristlets. Later on trade beads came and the women wore wristlets with blue trade beads. They wore the claws. Wristlets with two beaver claws are worn. A lynx claw is also a wristlet. Now in the modern life Medicine Pipe owners wore necklaces with beads.

Whoever wants to trace back my story, the man whose wife was kidnapped into the water, it was the beavers that kidnapped his wife into the water. A pipe was given to him as a token of apology. When the pipe was given out from the water, were there any white men then who would give the man some beads? There were no white men at that time. They wore wristlets with beads just recently. Beads are recent. There are no beads on the ancient materials. That is why the feathers of a medicine hat are quilled and quilled buckskin suits. Beads are recent. Now life is modern. Many things are attached, that is why

there are not any facial paintings. There are a lot of new inventions.

Now, how a beaver uses its tail. The people of the past used beavers; they took the beavers as humans; they consider them holy. The beavers made themselves live. The way they were seen they transformed into human beings. The beavers were blamed that they gave the songs. They invited all various kinds of animals and birds when they were going to present the Water Bundle Pipe. When they were going to present the pipe they invited all the animals and birds.

All the animals and birds were made to sing. They didn't have anything to donate so they donated their skins. That is why they are called utility bags. I (First Rider) used to hear people say, "I will buy food for the owner of the utility bags." My father bought food for the Utility Bag Bundle. He bought food for Bull Backfat's utility bags. A man by the name of Young Pine was sick and he said, "I'll buy food for Big Snake Person's Utility Bag Bundle so that I may recover."

Young Pine got better, so he boiled some berries and he bought some food and the utility bags were unwrapped and he (Young Pine) danced with the beaver. People worship those sacred bundles. In this modern life we worship the Medicine Pipes.

Okay, the beaver skin is tanned and it is used as a cushion on the saddle. It is called the furry saddle (saddle blanket). That is why there are given names of Saddle Blanket. There are a lot of various kinds of hide saddle blankets. I (First Rider) will say one thing that why some people have cougar saddles. The hides are not saddle blankets, they are spread out on the saddles for a cushion. That is why they are called saddle. The beaver blanket is a saddle.

Women make leggings out of the beaver skins. The leggings are from below the knees down to the ankles. The women make winter clothing out of the skins with the fur inside. Those are beaver pants (beaver leggings).

Some women will be tanning a beaver skin. A horse's tail will be bobbed with a strip of beaver skin of about an arm length. This strip of beaver skin is used for binding and tying. It is not used to tie rubbish; it is used to tie precious things. Also women use the beaver skin for moccasin tops. The bile of a beaver will be applied on a wound that doesn't heal and that will heap up the wound. The beaver bile is used as a chemical. That is why there are given names such as Beaver, Holy Beaver and White Beaver. There are a lot of given names of the beaver. It's because we consider them holy and we pray to the beavers.

A beaver skin will be tanned; it may be at a Sundance. The beaver skin will be tied to willows that are tied crosswise and when the Horn members go around the camps the beaver skin will be given to them for an offering and they are tied on top

of the centre lodge pole.

In the future a man, an old man, will go to a Group Smoking ceremony and when he is going to sing the laying down song, he will use the beaver skin offering in the laying down singing. He'll say, "Sun, how is it that you don't know me. That beaver skin with sketches on it, so and so tied it on top of the centre lodge pole." The word tied on top of the centre lodge pole is a big thing. Another person will say a hide with a beaver-colored fur was tied at the crotch of the centre lodge pole.

Okay, some people are possessed by the beavers. There are beaver designed tipis. Beavers gnawed a hole in the ice. The native people perfume themselves with beaver castors. The beavers are famous because they are used in many ways. Okay,

the beavers. Even a beaver is small and we will pack it on our backs, we won't go very far with it when it will tire us. We won't be able to pack it on our backs any further; that is another thing about the beavers. These are the questions that I (First Rider) was asked, to give an information of what the beavers are used for and how they are used.

People that are going on a buffalo chase will wear beaver leggings. Everybody doesn't wear beaver leggings. A wealthy man will kill some beavers and the skins are treated and the leggings are made. The fur will be on the outside. Wet snow will not soak the leggings and even if they run into snow water the water will not stick to the fur. That is the reason why they wear them and that is why they make their moccasin tops of beaver skins. The beaver skins are used as -- I (First Rider) will say they are used as rain coats. They will not get wet, so the beaver skins are useful in that way.

Okay, being a beaver. I (First Rider) saw an old woman, her name is Holy Calf. That is the woman that goes and feeds some beavers. Her husband is a white man. She had nothing to do. She was ill. She had T.B. and as she is nothing feeling good. They lived by the river and she goes to feed the beavers. The beavers knew then that she was feeding them. Finally she just sits far back and she sees the beavers eating the food. This woman is the one that had T.B. She was at the verge of death; miraculously she had her recovery from the beavers. I (First Rider) didn't tell the story about her plainly because I've told the story about the one that went into the beaver hut and who survived by the beavers. So that is how the beavers are used, and that is how mysterious they are. Some people survived by the beavers. People will be in combat and even if they put down their beaver quivers on the snow or in a wet place the quivers will not soak. So that is what the beavers are used for. At this point I conclude my story about the beavers. That is all. I now close my story. That is all.

INDEX TERM	IH NUMBER	DOC NAME	DISC #	PAGE #
BUNDLES				
-Utility Bag Bundle	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	5
BUNDLES				
-Water Bundle	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	4,5
BUNDLES				
-transfer of	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	4
CEREMONIALISM				
-smoking	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	6
CLOTHING AND PERSONAL ADORNMENT				
-pre-European	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	5
HIDES				
-tanning	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	6
HIDES				
-uses of	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	5,6,7
NAMES (PERSONAL)				
-origins of	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	6
PIPES AND SMOKING				
-Medicine Pipe	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	4
PIPES AND SMOKING				
-Water Bundle Pipe	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	4,5
SOCIETIES				
-Water bundle Society (Blackfoot)	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	4
STORIES AND STORYTELLING (GENERAL)				
-animal	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	2,5
TIPI				
-decoration of	IH-AA.101	BEAVER	57	3,4