

The Banff Indian Days

The photographs presented in this issue were taken at the Banff Indian Days between 1890 and 1948. Held annually in Banff, Alberta, until the 1970s, these Indian Days were a renowned event that attracted visitors and participants from around the world. During the week-long celebrations Native people from Canada's prairie provinces gathered in the Rocky Mountain resort town to socialize, entertain visitors and participate in rodeo sports, musical events, novelty contests and parades.

Though popular, the Banff Indian Days were not unique. The events were based on concepts that had already succeeded on the American tourist market as early as the 1880s. The selling of Indian arts and crafts and the marketing of Indian culture, for example, had gained popularity in the American Southwest at least twenty years prior to the organizing of the Banff Days. In addition, the image of the Indian had come to world attention through the success of travelling Wild West shows, such as that of Buffalo Bill Cody, and Alberta Indians were regular participants in numerous agricultural exhibitions and fairs, including the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede.¹

Two central events of the Indian Days were the grand parade and the rodeo. The parade was the opening event of the festivities and moved from the tipi village outside the town, through Banff's crowd-lined streets, to the courtyard of the opulent Banff Springs Hotel. Mounted on horseback and wearing their finest buckskin outfits, the Indian participants rode slowly, joking with tourists and occasionally "roping a pretty girl from amongst the spectators." At the hotel the parade disbanded for the bestowing of Indian Days honours and awards. This break in the procession provided an opportunity for speeches by various Indians, Banffites and visiting dignitaries. At this point a cash prize was awarded for best costume and parade participants were presented with gifts of candy, cigarettes, cigars and oranges before the parade returned back to the tipi village.²

The rodeo at the Banff Indian Days varied from year to year, but generally included exhibition bareback and saddle bucking contests, roping competitions, races and trick riding, wrestling on horseback, and slow races. Archery events held on the rodeo grounds, where Indian marksmen shot simultaneously at a single stuffed sheep or goat target, also proved

popular with audiences. For these events the spectators were kept at a safe distance behind temporary wooden fences.

In addition to the rodeo money prizes and the gifts of candy and cigarettes presented after the parade, Banff Indian Days participants were provided with meat and rations by local Banff merchants for the duration of the festivities. Beginning in the 1920s, the Indians were given buffalo meat from animals of the Elk Island Park herd. Indian Days chairman Norman Luxton arranged the purchase of carcasses from the federally managed herd and ensured their storage and transportation to Banff. The butchering and presentation of the buffalo carcasses formed another Indian Days "event." The buffalo meat, however, was not always consumed by the Indians since it often made them ill. Substitute beef was usually distributed following the spectacle of the "rationing" of the buffalo meat.³

The Banff Indian Days attracted not only large numbers of tourists to Banff, but also national and international celebrities and dignitaries. In 1919, for example, Edward, Prince of Wales, was an honoured guest; in 1939 Helen Keller was a featured personality; the Duke of Connaught, New York Zoo director William Hornaday, and authors Peter Kyne and Charles G.D. Roberts also attended frequently. New York newspapers reported on the Banff Indian Days, and the participation of distinguished visitors in the events added to the prestige and "high-society" image of the Days.

The presence of the Indians in Banff for the purpose of entertaining tourists was certainly successful, but not without controversy. The Department of Indian Affairs felt that the urban fair environment condoned a "revival of barbarism" and paganism, and had an unsettling effect on Indians.⁴ On the other hand, the Indians were supported by influential Whites in their efforts to attend such fairs. These Whites apparently viewed themselves as reacting against puritanical government control and as fighting in defence of business interests.⁵

It appears that the Banff Indian Days were an event that successfully mediated contact between Indians and Whites during a period in Canadian history when Native people were increasingly confined to reserves and subjected to restrictive government policies; the Indian Days provided an opportunity for tourists and Indians to interact freely. Through the events of the Banff Indian Days the participating Indian population was able to present a particular image of Indian culture to visiting Euro-American tourists and locals. The Indian performers and craftsmen carefully adjusted this image of Indian culture to meet what they perceived to be the needs and wants of the tourist market. At the same time, the Indians used the Banff Indian Days to publicly assert their claims to a distinct,

identifiable and independent heritage. If the nature and popularity of the Banff Indian Days are any indication, government policies did *not* necessarily reflect popular attitudes towards Indians in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. At the Banff Indian Days, Indians were taking advantage of a situation presented to them, in a time when advantageous situations were few and far between.

Laurie Meijer Drees

Notes

- 1 Edwin L. Wade, "The Ethnic Art Market in the Southwest," in *Objects and Others*, edited by G.W. Stocking Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
- 2 Glenbow Archives Newspaper Clipping file, Banff Indian Days, *Calgary Herald*, 22 July 1925, and also *Calgary Herald*, no date, in the Norman Luxton Papers, file 138.
- 3 Norman Luxton Papers, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, file 56.
- 4 Keith Regular, "On Public Display," *Alberta History* 34, no. 1 (1986): 1, 2, 4, 6.
- 5 Keith Regular, "Red Backs and White Burdens," M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 1985, p. 154.

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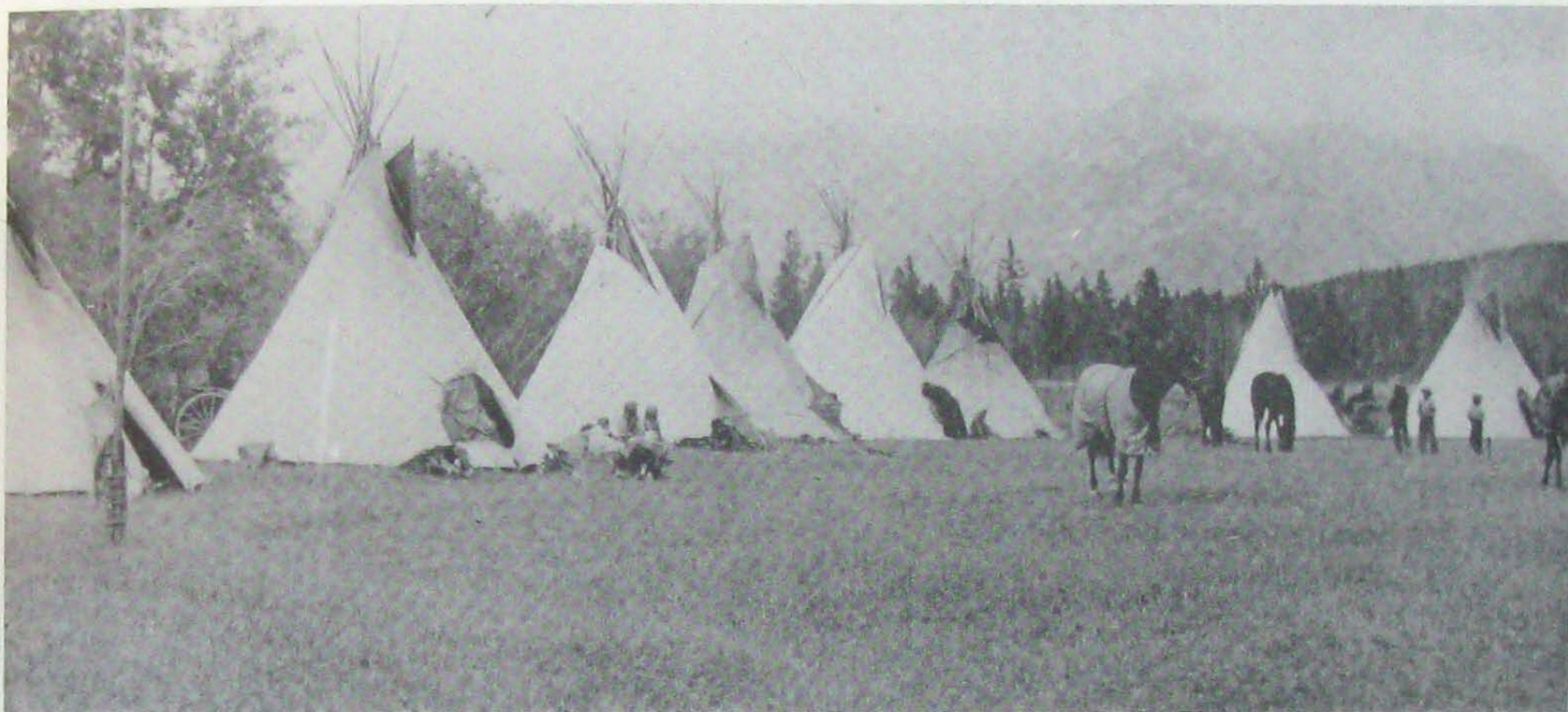


Plate 1: Stony Indian camp at first Banff Indian Days, Banff Alberta, ca. 1890. Note that the tipis are unpainted.
Source: Billy Whitnew, c/o Sarcee People's Museum.



Plate 2: Encampment during the visit by the Prince of Wales, September 1919. Note flags. Photographed by W.J. Oliver, Calgary. Source: E.W. Cadman, Calgary.



Plate 3: Visit of the Prince of Wales, September 1919. Platform officials include Capt. Greig, Prince of Wales, Aide, Admiral Halsey, Lt. Gov. Brett, J.M. Wardle (Superintendent of Banff National Park), and Martin Burrell (Secretary of State). Photographed by W.J. Oliver, Calgary. Source: E.W. Cadman, Calgary.



Plate 4: Bob Pearson at Indian tipi, Banff, ca. 1920s. Photographed by Dan McCowan, Banff.
Source: Luxton Museum.



Plate 5: Group at Indian Days, Banff, no date. Left to right: Dave McDougall, Lulu Parr, Mrs. Bob Lothian, ..., ..., Bob Lothian, ..., Bertha Ericson, ..., Cecillia Price, Ina Cunningham. Source: Mrs. Forest Kidney, Banff.



Plate 6: Stony Indians engaged in archery contest, ca. 1920s. Photographed by Dan McCowan, Banff. Source: Luxton Museum.



Plate 7: Jonas Benjamin, Stony Indian, with sacks of flour and other rations handed out to Indian Days participants, 1924. Photographed by Dan McCowan, Banff. Source: Luxton Museum.



Plate 8: Enos Hunter, Stony Indian, ca. 1920s. Photographed by Dan McCowan, Banff. Source: Luxton Museum.



Plate 9: Stony Indians in costume in front of White's store, Banff, 1925. Photographed by Dan McCowan, Banff. Source: Luxton Museum.



Plate 10: Indians in entrance square, Banff Springs Hotel, 1926. Source: Banff Springs Hotel.



Plate 11: Banff Indian Days archery practice, 1941. Photographed by Fern Gully. Source: Fern Gully.



Plate 12: Banff Indian Days riding contest, 18 July 1942. Photographed by Fern Gully. Source: Fern Gully.



Plate 13: Stony Indian all-girls band entertains during 1942 Indian Days. Photographed by Fern Gully. Source: Fern Gully.



Plate 14: Stony Indians dividing up rations, 18 July 1942; Enos Hunter is in centre. Photographed by Fern Gully. Source: Fern Gully.



Plate 15: Stony Indians on horseback and officials, 1948 Banff Indian Days. Photographed by Fern Gully. Source: Fern Gully.



Plate 16: Spectators lined up to view rodeo events during 1948 Indian Days. Photographed by Fern Gully. Source: Fern Gully.



Plate 17: Banff Indian Days entertainers, dressed up for theatrical pageant, 1948. Photographed by Fern Gully. Source: Fern Gully.



Plate 18: Stony Indian women constructing tipis at Cascade Park, site of the Indian village, 1948. Basic three-pole foundation is shown. Photographed by Fern Gully. Source: Fern Gully.