

THE MEDICINE ROCK OF THE MARIAS: A BLACKFOOT SHRINE BESIDE THE WHOOP-UP TRAIL.*

By John C. Ewers

In an account of Blackfoot Indian religion, published sixty years ago, George Bird Grinnell mentioned:

"Another sacred object is the medicine rock of the Marias. It is a huge boulder of reddish sandstone, two-thirds of the way up a steep hill on the north bank of the Marias River, about five miles from Fort Conrad. Formerly this rock rested on the top of the bluff but, as the soil about it was worn away by the wind and rain, it is slowly moving down the hill. The Indians believe it to be alive, and make presents to it. When I first visited it, the ground about it was strewn with decaying remnants of offerings that had been made to it in the past. Among these I noticed, besides fragments of clothing, eagle feathers, a steel finger ring, brass ear-rings, and a little bottle made of two copper cartridge cases."¹

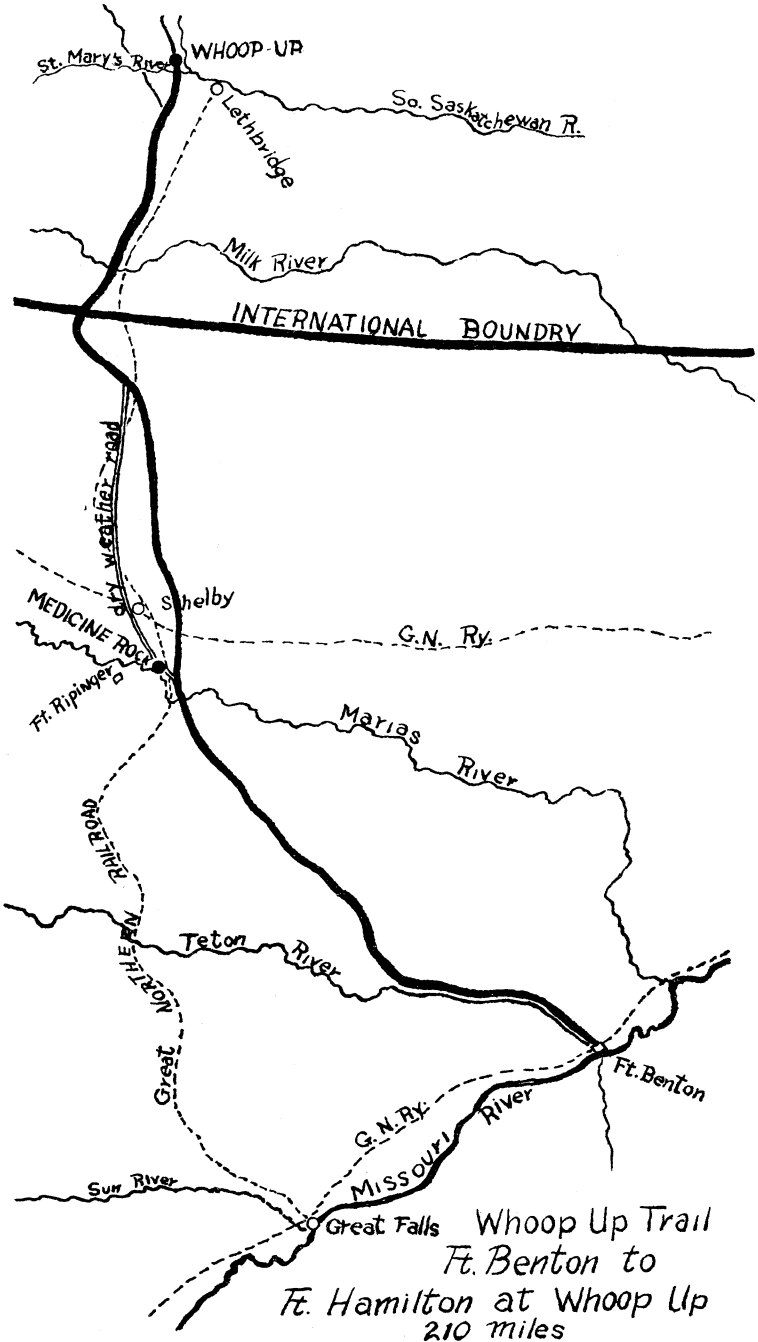
This "Medicine Rock" was a landmark on the old Whoop-up Trail leading northward from Fort Benton to the American posts established in southern Alberta in the late 1860s. The sketch map of that trail in the Montana Historical Society collections, prepared by Harry Stanford, a Montana pioneer, shows it ascending "Medicine Rock Coulee" on the north side of the Marias. On the west side of the trail leading up the coulee the mapmaker placed a red dot and labeled it "Medicine Rock" (See illustration.)

In the fall of 1943, Short Face, an elderly, full-blood Piegan living on the Blackfeet Reservation, told me the story of this "Medicine Rock" as it had been recited to him nearly a half-century earlier by an aged Indian, Spotted Calf, who claimed to have had personal knowledge of the origin of this shrine.

"One time a war party of North Blackfoot went to the enemy. All but two of its members were killed by the Sioux. These two were returning northward over the Narrow Ridge Trail. One of them was armed with a muzzle-loader. The other carried only a bow and arrows. They were poorly clothed. By the time they

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¹ George Bird Grinnell, *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*, (New York, 1892). 262-263. Fort Conrad was built in 1875 by Sol Abbott and Henry Powell. It was located near the present Naismith Bridge over the Marias River.



reached the Marias the man with the muzzle-loader had run out of ammunition. They hadn't eaten in a long time. Both of them were very hungry.

Near the Marias they saw a large rattlesnake. One of the men said to his partner, "Let's kill him and eat him." The other replied, "No, we don't eat that sort of thing." Nevertheless, the first speaker killed the rattlesnake, skinned it and cooked it. Then he said, "Now, partner take half of it." Again his friend replied, "No, I am not hungry. The smell of it has taken my appetite away." The other man began to eat, and said, "Partner, you better eat some of this. It tastes good—like fish." Once more his friend declined, saying, "No, I am not hungry."

They spent the night there. Next morning the warrior who had eaten the snake was so bloated he couldn't move. His partner tried to help him, but the snake-eater said it was useless. "You can do nothing for me. Make a place where I can lie down and cover it with sage." This his partner did. Then the snake-eater continued, "Take off my necklace. When you get back to camp give it to my father, who gave it to me. Tell him what happened to his son. Tell him that in the spring of the year you two must come for me."

His partner followed his advice and went home, the only member of the war party to return. He gave the necklace to his friend's father, told him how his partner had eaten the rattlesnake and become so bloated he could not move, and how he had asked them to return in the spring. The old man said, "I want to see my boy right away. I'll give you horses and other articles if you will take me to him." But the young man replied, "No, my friend said for us to come for him in the spring. That is his wish."

When spring arrived the old father called upon the young man, "My boy, I can't go now. The coyotes must have taken my son's bones. But if you will join a war party of Blood Indians now forming, you can go by the place you left my son, gather his bones and bury them."

Spotted Calf, a Blood Indian, was a member of this war party. When they arrived at a side hill overlooking the Marias River, the North Blackfoot warrior explained, "Here is where I dug my partner in." But there was nothing there except a large rock. Seeing this, another North Blackfoot member of the party said, "This man is lying. If his partner had been here surely we would find some trace of him—some of his hair or his bones." The critic then rolled the rock away. But the other members of the party prayed to the rock.

That night the party camped on the south side of the Marias. The skeptic continued to make fun of the snake-eater's partner and his unlikely story, saying that he had been lying, until he succeeded in getting the other members of the party to agree with him. They all made fun of the snake-eater's partner that night.

When the partner of the deceased snake-eater arose next morning he looked across the river and saw a man standing on the hill where the rock had been. He woke Spotted Calf and Spotted Calf also saw the man. They woke the others. All saw the man and believed him to be an enemy. The North Blackfoot and Spotted Calf crossed the river to get a closer view of the stranger. When they reached the other side they saw no one. But they rolled the rock back up the hill and placed it where they had first seen it. Spotted Calf left a blanket, tobacco and other small gifts at the rock.

Spotted Calf and the North Blackfoot agreed that the man they saw must have been the snake-eater's spirit. The North Blackfoot addressed the rock, "If you, rock, are my partner, help this man (Spotted Calf) to be lucky. Give him power to get horses from the enemy." The two then painted the rock with earth paint and returned to their party on the other side of the river.

The war party, which numbered 14 men, started to the enemy. But the Gros Ventres and Assiniboin sighted them coming and laid for them. They surprised the party and killed every man except the North Blackfoot and Spotted Calf. They escaped, and on their way back found a large herd of horses. The two survivors separated near the site of an old fort, the North Blackfoot going north to his people.

Spotted Calf continued on up the Marias with his horses. He passed the rock on his way and decided to stop. He killed a buffalo, took out the liver and fat and left it by the rock. Then he spoke to the rock, "If you are the man, take this to eat."

That night the spirit of the departed snake-eater appeared to Spotted Calf in his dream, saying, "I thank you and my partner for giving me a blanket, tobacco and food. My partner was not lying to you. I thank you, and shall give you power to become a renowned warrior and to live to old age."

When Spotted Calf returned to his camp he told the people of his experience. Later it became known to all the Piegan, North Blackfoot and Blood Indians. From that time on members of these three tribes stopped by the rock and left presents of beads, paint,

tobacco and other articles, when they travelled the Narrow Ridge Trail."

Geologists will take a dim view of Spotted Calf's explanation of the supernatural origin of this small but interesting Montana landmark. However, Spotted Calf's story may be helpful to historians and ethnologists in dating Blackfoot recognition of this rock as a sacred shrine. According to the Blackfeet Agency Census of 1901, Spotted Calf (also known as Old Running Rabbit) was 74 years of age. Thus he was born about the year 1827. If the Blackfoot tribes began to endow this rock with supernatural powers when Spotted Calf was a young warrior, as his testimony has indicated, the Medicine Rock of the Marias must not have become a Blackfoot shrine until the decade of the 1840s. This was roughly a quarter century before the Narrow Ridge Trail of Blackfoot war parties become the Whoop-up Trail of white men's commerce.