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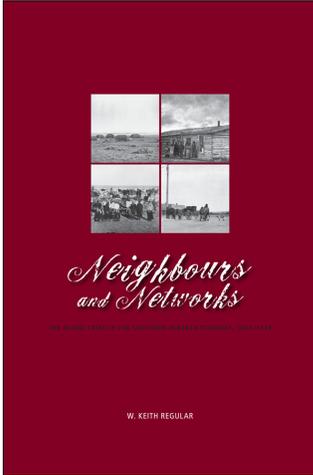
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NEIGHBOURS AND NETWORKS: THE BLOOD TRIBE IN THE SOUTHERN ALBERTA ECONOMY, 1884-1939

by W. Keith Regular

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6: Conclusion: Change Over Time

This study is a survey of one small area of southern Alberta containing an immigrant population encountering a host Native culture. It highlights inherent dangers in assumptions of Native isolation and exclusion from market processes. The intent was to ascertain how both Natives and newcomers fit together at the economically significant points of encounter, land and products from the land, labour and monetary exchange. This southern Alberta location fits historian W.L. Morton's definition of a 'site,' that is, an area having both significance of geographic position and economic function. Though the significance of a 'site' "varies with the nature of the environment and the state of technology," the region has been deemed more or less significant over time by its various inhabitants and for a variety of reasons.¹ Canada, driven by a dream of continental expansion, regarded the region and the surrounding expanse of prairie and parkland as necessary for its geographic and imperial ambitions. Settlers regarded the area as a homeland to sustain anticipated prosperity. The Bloods clearly indicated the significance of this region to themselves when they selected their reserve.

The significance of this site was rarely, if ever, questioned by the nation that viewed the West as a fount of wealth, a hinterland appendage to be exploited.² Those settlers who lived there came to question its suitability for their purposes only after the heady visions of progress and prosperity had been tempered by the bitter experience of failure. This in turn brought about a reassessment of the viability of this 'next-year country' to sustain their dreams. However, the fluctuating fortunes and altering circumstances threatening survival gave added critical significance to the area of the Blood reserve and its possessors. It seemed to be endowed with rescue potential, offering the possibility of the neighbouring individuals and communities to repair the frustrated hopes shattered by nature and the limitations imposed by the 160-acre homestead.³ These hopes, however,

were at times contingent on the Bloods being conscripted into a co-operative and reciprocal partnership with their neighbours.

The dynamic at work in this area both encapsulated the hopes and reflected the policies of Canada's expanding national influence: Fort Macleod founded by the NWMP represented the extension of authority, Lethbridge the grasp of expanded eastern enterprise, and communities such as Cardston and Raymond the reality of transplanted society and economy, the tramp of 'civilization' across the frontier.⁴ The formation of the Blood reserve, and Native reserves in general, illustrated for the newcomers the dispossession of the Natives and foreshadowed their imminent assimilation or even extinction. Irene Spry, however, argued that, after the influx of immigrants into the Red River area, Natives collaborated with the new economy and gained an appreciation for "a cash calculation of well-being."⁵ Similarly, in southern Alberta, the new economy created demands for land, materials, money and labour, all of which the Bloods possessed in varying degrees at various times. Thus the fortunes and history of the Natives and the Whites were of necessity intertwined. The needs of both the Bloods and their neighbours, though seen by some as competitive, rationally encouraged co-operation and integration of the 'white' neighbourhood with the reserve.

During the period of this study, the Bloods experienced continual change and adaptation as they had for millennia. The influx of non-Natives into the Bloods' Plains homeland occasioned reappraisal and realignment of commercial and cultural relationships. During this period, Euro-American presence overwhelmed Native populations just as their capitalist economies overwhelmed precapitalist Native behaviours. Crisis, however, was mitigated by the Bloods' adaptive capacity. Skills, ingenuity, and physical prowess were summoned to successfully meet various emergent circumstances. The Bloods looked to inclusion in commodity markets and embraced competition rather than resist it. The changed economic circumstances became their own version of an exterior imposed regimen. The Bloods were able to function this way because they saw adaptation and reciprocity as natural economic and cultural processes. The reserve land base with its cultural uniformity sustained their integrity and their limited self-determination.

Rolf Knight argues that the limited economic return from agriculture on the prairies stimulated an outward and diversified approach to earning income.⁶ The Bloods took a much more diversified approach to work and income than is often credited. For example, as early as 1896, the DIA

recognized that the area in which the Bloods resided was not particularly suited to crop agriculture and as a result the Department encouraged them to take up mixed farming or stock-raising.⁷ Within two years, the Bloods had added freighting to their economic activities.⁸ By 1903 the agent downplayed the significance of farming, noting that cattle, hay, and freighting, both for “the reserve and the neighbouring ranchers,” returned more revenue.⁹

By 1904 the Bloods had diversified once again and added labour in the Raymond sugar beet fields to their income-earning opportunities. Crop agriculture may have been, as Hana Samek argues, unsuccessful, but its modest nature initially should not be construed to represent overall Blood economic achievement.¹⁰ Even officially measured economic returns from these activities may not indicate the true measure of successful Blood economic endeavours as they responded to off-reserve demand for their labour and resources.

It may be more revealing, therefore, to compare the Bloods, not with prairie farmers who pursued cereal grain monoculture, but rather with Whites who practised subsistence farming and were required to follow a variety of seasonal occupations and with other Native groups such as the Cree. This included working for others and temporarily migrating, for some permanently, to other areas in order to eke out an existence. Thus a variety of occupations were followed in the completion of a work year. Geographer Larry McCann has pointed to the need for such an adaptive strategy among Atlantic Canadians responding to the failure of industrialism to bring full and permanent employment.¹¹ This chasing of a variety of occupations has similarly been noted by Beal for the Cree of Saskatchewan.¹²

Although the Canadian government recognized Aboriginal right or title to the lands they occupied, others did not.¹³ Expansion to the westward, for the man on the street or behind the plough, simply meant the acquisition of free and available land. This view was totally at odds with Native perceptions that they owned the land and continued to have unimpeded rights confirmed by treaty. Once established, however, ranchers and settlers alike accepted reserves as inviolable Indian lands only as long as their borders could not be breached or the non-Native community did not need them. Efforts to breach Blood resilience specifically and Native resilience generally were supported by government policy. The attitudes and actions of both settlers and government placed intense pressure on the Indians to alienate large segments of their reserves in the interests of

the incoming settler population.¹⁴ The Bloods, however, stubbornly and generally successfully resisted such persuasion and pressure.

The influx of settlers after the turn of the century and the enthusiasm of town booster ideology resulted in a more integrated region. Towns vied for supremacy in the surrounding hinterland and insisted that communication and commerce required efficient transportation routes. The pressure on the Bloods to open their reserve's borders to provide access was strong and persistent. Cardston insistently regarded the reserve roadways as thoroughfares to more effectively extend its reach and became a troublesome neighbour to the Bloods. When in 1899, for example, the DIA granted a road allowance through the Blood Reserve from Cardston to the St. Mary River, Agent James Wilson wanted to close the old road allowance that he felt was now redundant. Wilson was perturbed to learn, however, that the new one was simply to be an addition to the two already existing, and that the White settlers considered all three roadways necessary. Wilson rightly concluded that since the Bloods had no use for such a road, and since it interfered with the reserve boundary, it was obviously intended solely for the benefit of the citizens of Cardston.¹⁵

As towns and villages such as Hillspring, Glenwood, Mountain View, Magrath, and Raymond extended their reach towards both the east and the west, the reserve was absorbed into the local transportation system by travellers and entrepreneurs who sought the most efficient and shortest means of communication and movement. Thus the reserve was drawn into a burgeoning complex of social and economic networks. The Bloods, however, were aware of their needs and were determined to set their own agenda. In 1899 the Bloods fenced the road connecting Cardston and Mountain View where it crossed the reserve, much to the chagrin of local residents who complained that it inconvenienced the travelling public and hindered mail delivery. Despite the fact there was clear trespass on the reserve, the DIA recommended that the fence be removed to grant unimpeded movement across the reserve. However, the DIA determined that the Government of the Territories could not secure road access without the consent or surrender of the Bloods.¹⁶

The demands for roads across the reserve, and reserve surrender to facilitate their construction, continued through the 1920s. Added pressure was exerted on the Bloods in the 1920s and 1930s by the province of Alberta as it sought to update and better integrate its transportation systems to accommodate rural and urban growth.¹⁷ Ultimately these roadways proved beneficial to the Bloods as people and commerce used the right of ways.

Any attempt to socially and economically isolate the Bloods was frustrated by the demands and needs of the non-Native community and the governments that worked on their behalf. As late as 1926 DIA secretary J.D. McLean, on the occasion of turning down the most recent request for yet another road right of way across the Blood reserve, reassured the Province of Alberta that “the Department is willing to expedite the development of the country by allowing roads to be established anywhere necessary”¹⁸ but would not necessarily accede to every request.

The Bloods clearly did not remain economically or physically isolated, despite attitudes relegating Natives to a menial social position or the existence of their reserve as a social and political entity.¹⁹ They were almost immediately drawn into the newly emerging complex of economic patterns established by the rancher, farmer, town, and village regimes. The needs of the new settlers, both real and imagined, readily opened doors to mutual co-operation and exchange with the Bloods. Economics proved more potent than social attitudes and prejudice and ultimately more of a unifying force than a divisive one.

Penrose believes that the loss of the buffalo left Plains Natives “with very few options” except farming and ranching. Surely this is overstated. The assumption that Natives “were duly confined to small reserves ... [and] out of the way” as an all-inclusive assertion simply cannot be sustained.²⁰ More than anything, perhaps, we have to rethink the effectiveness of confinement with regard to Natives and their reserves and challenge the tendency to regard confinement as approaching the absolute. It thus becomes easy to internalize an ideology of “out of *site*, out of mind” with regard to Natives, endowing the various reserves with absolute isolationist properties, however unreal. This has permitted non-Natives to imagine control of Natives’ daily patterns and micro-management of the economic agenda.

It is inconceivable that the Blood population, with their more than 500 square miles of territory, and the variety of resources and people skills contained therein, would have had no self-directed impact on, or part to play in, a local or regional economy. It is inconceivable, as well, that local business enterprises and mercantile interests, in general, would not recognize the benefits to be gained from tapping the resources of this land base and its people and be, therefore, content to let the Bloods remain in passive isolation. Though reserves were planned as isolation units in which social engineering and economic reorientation could take place, Natives and Whites could not be kept apart except through a rigorous application of the regulations. To believe they could denies the Bloods’ participation

in the economic life of the region. The reality is, however, that the Bloods did have a significant impact.

The Bloods entered the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries having to deal with a much different incoming society. Unlike early explorers and fur traders, the primary desire of the new arrivals was to directly integrate the region into the national economy and exchange agricultural products for the manufactured goods of central Canada. They quickly found that the Bloods had much to offer in fulfilling their individual or collective dreams for prosperity. With their traditional buffalo economy made obsolete, the Bloods themselves needed goods that could make their existence more tolerable. Whites needed both Blood land and labour and the purchasing power the tribe, and Natives in general, represented; hence, it was impossible for the Bloods to remain detached from the economic forces at play around them. Acts of mutual exchange occurred, not through default, but were deliberately sought out and generally welcomed by all parties.

Both the Bloods and the non-Native community recognized the potential each held for the other. Non-Natives were aware of the benefits that Blood land promised and recognized that the Blood people could supply needed raw materials. For the ranching industry, the increase in the number of cattle and the subsequent reduced grazing capacity, limitations imposed by variations in weather and natural disasters, made the large area of the Blood reserve important to its well-being. In a calculated response, the Bloods systematically and strategically offered their land as a market commodity. When direct access to the Bloods' land and its resources was denied to non-Natives, the Bloods were contracted to supply their labour and the desired produce. By all indications, the Bloods were not loath to accept such arrangements if they believed they could derive financial benefit. The intensity with which the payment of land rents was fought, or avoided, sustains the argument that access to the Blood reserve was perceived by many Whites as a *necessary right* with which they were reluctant to part. The voluminous correspondence on this issue suggests this access was regarded as a genuine need.

Ranchers could co-exist with the reserve as a political entity so long as they were not deprived of access to grazing land. Farming, however, was more land-use intensive and individual. Land that was separate and legally inalienable was simply not available for sustained and planned farming. The Bloods dismissed demands to surrender land, and the more insistent the demands became the more the Bloods refused to accommodate the

needs of the non-Native community, preferring instead to move to large-scale land rental.

Land, as a commodity, became the focus of development both for the Indians and the non-Native interests. Opinions differed between the Government, seeking to realize a specific policy aimed at answering the needs of an immigrant population, and the Bloods, hoping to realize benefits from their titled possession. And although historians have often judged Indian agents as mean-spirited and neglectful of Native interests, agents defended the rights of the Bloods both against the Department's intent and against rancher and farmer interlopers.

It is clear that the land base of the Blood reserve played an important part in the economic well-being of ranching and subsequently the mixed farming enterprises of the region. When the non-Native needs did not clash with the Bloods' own requirements, an accommodation, though sometimes strained, could usually be worked out. Problems arose when over-exploitation exhausted the land to the detriment of the Bloods, as happened during the drought of the 1930s. Difficulties also occurred when the government failed to recognize or adequately protect the Bloods from the impact of illegal land use and the abuse of lease privileges.

The Bloods, through their agents, pressed the Department to protect their reserve from illegal and unwarranted intrusion and exploitation. The main problem was that the DIA felt it knew best what the Bloods needed and acted accordingly. Thus the reserve's resources were sometimes alienated despite the protests of both the Indians and the local agent. Though this at times occasioned bitterness on the part of the Bloods, neither they nor their customers lost sight of the value of each to the other. Clearly, the Bloods' needs, reserve politics, various agents' ambitions, Department policy and natural conditions; all had a part to play in determining the disposal of reserve resources. Drought conditions during the 1930s, for example, eventually led to a decision to curb outsider access, although it was implemented only in part.

Not only did the Bloods integrate their land into the growing economic system of their area but they also sold their produce and labour. Thus for a short time the Bloods' coal and hay sales and their contract freighting displaced those who were less competitive or who lacked the Bloods' connections. Significantly, despite official policy directed at curbing the Native competition with Whites, the Blood agents were forceful and energetic in acquiring off-reserve employment for their charges, opportunities that the Bloods were quick to seize. This was not seriously challenged by the DIA.

Attempts by the public to restrict the Bloods' market access all failed and indeed by the 1920s the DIA had accepted the Bloods' right to inclusion, if only because it now supported the government's policy of fiscal restraint.

Blood labour in the Raymond sugar beet fields provides perhaps the best example of their participation in the local economy through the labour market. They were aggressively recruited for this work and were deemed essential by the growers to the functioning of the industry. Despite repeated attempts by the industry, no suitable alternative labour could initially be found to replace them. The beet industry eventually went into decline, and, while critics blamed an inadequate labour supply, it is clear that market forces independent of labour supply were important contributing factors to the failure. A more detailed examination of the sugar beet industry in southern Alberta for this early period is clearly indicated.

Blood income was also important to the local economy. Both the DIA and the Bloods themselves could only meet their immediate needs through commerce with off-reserve businesses. Whether or not Natives possessed personal wealth, they generated wealth by their needs. Most non-Native entrepreneurs held the mistaken idea that the government was a bottomless purse on which the Bloods had call. Thus merchants in both Cardston and Fort Macleod curried Indian favour – in fact competed for it despite the obvious risks. Problems with debt collection, however, never resulted in a long-term denial of credit to the Bloods, though the Department did attempt to enforce its own restrictions by making such collection difficult.

Clearly, DIA policy was not cohesively dispersed. Its local impact on the Bloods was determined in some measure by the character of various agents, the Blood chiefs, and the Bloods' collective will. These factors also determined relations with non-Native neighbours, both rural and urban. This study offers such insights into practical motivations that also drove Blood economic adaptive capacity and desires and which influenced their economic relationships. Concerted campaigns and efforts to force Blood compliance or induce them to co-operate had limited success at best as illustrated by Blood behaviour in the sugar beet fields or with regard to leasing their land. Similarly, exclusion tactics as with commodity sales ended in non-Natives' frustrations.

What was striking, however, was that the Bloods, even though they became a numerical minority and faced an increasingly complex and more competitive market situation, maintained considerable local economic influence. Anthropologist Esther Goldfrank, for example, reported an annual Blood income of \$7,500 in 1895. And where Samek envisioned

agricultural failure, Goldfrank saw *change*, the partial abandonment of crop agriculture in favour of cattle-raising and the development of the more lucrative contract haying, with the result that by 1906 the annual income was \$40,000. By 1920 the income was \$254,332, more than a six-fold increase, and, as significant, less than one half of this was realized from agricultural products, including hay.²¹ The implications of this dramatic increase can better be appreciated when one considers that during this period the Blood population remained fairly constant, a population of 1,168 in 1906 and 1,158 in 1924.²² True, the Bloods' income collapsed with the onset of the Depression, declining from \$100,000 in 1930 to \$24,000 in 1932.²³ This dramatic collapse, however, did not set the Bloods apart; they simply suffered, as did all their neighbours, the misery of general national economic depression.²⁴

The Bloods participated in the tremendous economic growth experienced by Canada's agricultural sector during the 1920s, and it is in this decade that agricultural production became a critical factor in the Blood reserve economy. Between 1911 and 1920, the percentage of income attributable to farm products, including hay was 52.2 per cent, 39.2 per cent, 42.6 per cent, 43.3 per cent, or less than 50 per cent, except for the year of least income.²⁵ This evidence contradicts the commonly held belief that the Bloods had been so continually poverty-stricken that they did not even notice the collapse of regional and national economies in the Great Depression.²⁶ The decade of 1911 to 1920 had been one of increased economic diversification and increasing, if limited, prosperity. It was not until the decade of the 1920s that reserve farming finally accounted for more reserve income than other revenue sources. Prior to this, therefore, one must not give too much weight to crop agriculture, as its importance was discounted by agents and that of hay was stressed. By 1924, however, the total value of farm products including hay was \$209,000 or 74.6 per cent of total income of \$280,332.²⁷ Consequently, agriculture only became substantially significant after the period in which Samek determined Blackfoot reservation economies to have failed. By 1920, Samek says, the Bloods "were back on rations, with their economy having turned full circle back to the destitution of forty years earlier."²⁸ It is inconceivable that they failed to realize that their hundreds of thousands of dollars in income in the 1920s had shrunk to mere thousands in the early 1930s. It is more likely that the misery of the 1930s was many times compounded because of the relative prosperity of the previous decade, a problem common to the entire region.

There exists the view that both the Bloods and other Natives were inconsequential to and isolated from the economic and social processes unfolding around them. This is largely a result of viewing the history of relations from the standpoint of what was officially desired, demanded, or perceived as ideal by government, especially in creating a western economy based on farming, and not in viewing particular circumstance of specific locations. There is also a tendency to see Natives as exploited rather than as competitive or exploitative, a view that does not recognize the reality of economic and social relationships with neighbours. The Bloods' self-interested behaviour in the leasing of their land, the sale of their labour and produce, the way they spent their money, and incurred debt provides sufficient evidence. Their actions in the Raymond area beet fields are simply a further proof. The Blood reserve could not, no more than the surrounding countryside, exist in 'splendid isolation,' functioning independently of national, local, or and individual forces and drives. Both communities accommodated each other's needs, while operating within the framework of a regional and national economic system.

During the period of this study, the Bloods overcame the calamitous loss of the buffalo, took advantage of market forces, and largely avoided becoming totally marginalized. What emerges is a clear indication that the Bloods were more or less disadvantaged depending on the general economic circumstances to which both Natives and Whites were subjected. Some Bloods were likely more economically marginalized than some of their White neighbours, and less than others. Whites who were suffering financially could either leave or seek help from financial institutions and banks, options not open to the Bloods because of legal and cultural restrictions. The Bloods' land and patronage, however, often determined the well-being of the industries developing around them, and thus they became an essential, and not an irrelevant factor, in the local economy. As a consequence the Bloods could sometimes pick and choose the means with which to define or modify the associations, a situation wholly out of keeping with an insignificant status.

The Bloods experienced dramatic though by no means complete change in that not all traditional behaviours or mores were abandoned. Some, however, were adapted to accommodate the new circumstances and grasp the opportunities offered by the new economy. It was in the economic sphere that great change occurred, much of it self-directed, reflecting the Bloods comprehension of altered circumstance. In *Common and Contested Ground*, Theodore Binnema has illustrated the ebb and flow of the Plains

buffalo culture in which the Bloods participated. Clearly it is incorrect to think that, because the buffalo existed in large numbers, Plains people were provided with a life of ease. The fur trade economy, just as the post-buffalo economy, required constant orientation and accommodation.²⁹ Hugh Dempsey, in his study *Firewater*, has convincingly illustrated that the last days of the buffalo economy were filled with turmoil and destruction.³⁰ Indeed, the extent of this destruction necessitated economic readjustment. Treaty 7, and subsequent efforts to participate in new economic opportunities, offers evidence that the Bloods were fully cognizant of the new reality into which they had been thrust.

Many of the changes that the Bloods experienced and directed were transparent, many less so, but in the main the traditional yearly round of activities was increasingly altered with the passage of time. An excellent illustration of change was that, for the Bloods as for other Plains Natives, the “shopping spree” replaced the buffalo hunt and the general store, not the buffalo, became the ‘emporium’ for the Bloods’ needs. Beef replaced buffalo as the staple meat and the vegetable garden and grains supplemented what could be dug from nature’s garden. Wooden cottages replaced teepees as the primary living space, and movement was along well-trodden trails and roads to towns rather than with the intent of wide-ranging wanderings. Ranching, lease contracts, contract labour, share-cropping, mining, haulage, and credit purchasing were either new methods of economic behaviour or more formal and sophisticated adaptations of fur trade and buffalo robe trade customs. These were not absolute one-on-one transfers but indicate that the life of the Bloods in the post-buffalo era was in some ways substantially different from previous experience.

Life changed for the Bloods in the post-buffalo era. However, as far as human potential was concerned, skill, energy, foresight, and planning to maximize benefits from economic activities were still needed and used. True, Whites largely drove the economy. The Bloods, however, successfully responded to resource depletion and a new economic and political order. Unlike the Dakota, whom Peter Elias concluded suffered from an imposed isolation and therefore exclusion from the surrounding labour market, the attempt to impose the same on the Bloods did not succeed.³¹

The mistake has been to assume that all Plains Natives experienced the same fate following the loss of the buffalo and to accept the conclusion that somehow today’s stereotypes either reflect a historical reality in all cases or represent a continuity of experience through time. To do so is to assume that the Bloods were submissive in the face of government

repression, failed to appreciate the value of the wealth they possessed in their land and labour, had no need for material possessions that could improve their standard of living, and deliberately chose to remain outside the market economy. It is also to conclude that non-Natives did not recognize any potential in their Blood neighbours or, if they did so, chose to ignore it in favour of some perceived *status quo*. Neither conclusion is sensible or true. Each society had materials and skills the other needed, so an accommodation had to be worked out for both to thrive or simply function at only a sustainable level in their common environments.

Through diverse economic, environmental, social, and cultural changes, the Blood reserve and its people remained a constant in the fluctuating fortunes of the area. The reserve was an oasis, promising some limited respite from the shrinking economies of scale for those Whites who could access its benefits. The promise of the reserve's potential forged an economic link between the Bloods and their neighbours.

This work has attempted to illustrate an Indian reserve and the surrounding non-Native community as in some ways integrated. However, the extent of economic integration was not overwhelming, nor was it consistent for all the factors during this time period. There was a period, for example, when there was no coal mine and when sugar beet labour was not required or not available. Though limited, the extent of integration has not previously been appreciated for its significance. The Bloods were important first to the ranching community and then to the farmers and the towns for the produce, services, and capital they provided. Much more detailed work will have to be done to determine the extent to which this was common to other reserves. This work on the Bloods, as well as that of Beal on the Saskatchewan Cree, however, certainly suggest that alternative interpretations must be contemplated and investigated. It should be noted, however, that the size and location of the Blood reserve makes it difficult to apply conclusions reached here to other Native groups and communities. But there is no reason to suppose that the Bloods were exceptional in responding to the challenges of the post-buffalo period.

The southern Alberta area went through periods of economic highs and lows much like the economy of the rest of the country. Those economic downturns caused by nature, the national and the world economy generally, affected the region as a whole; when the surrounding White population suffered so did the Bloods, and vice versa. As the initial settlement phase ended, the Bloods had cast their lot with their neighbours. In consequence, Whites, the DIA, and individual tribal members sometimes

victimized the Bloods as a collective. But they did not respond as helpless victims. Instead, the Bloods enjoyed the benefits of economic co-operation and also suffered setbacks while making their contribution to the general well-being of the region.

Clearly the Bloods strategically adapted to the new post-buffalo reality and refused to be made 'strangers' in their own land.³² It was but the recurrence of an old theme in their tradition of experience, and their former experience had been one of success. Native reserves had a more important part to play in the local or regional history than has previously been credited. In this case, the Bloods' importance to the ranching and farming community and to commerce in Cardston, Fort Macleod, and Raymond is clear.

