

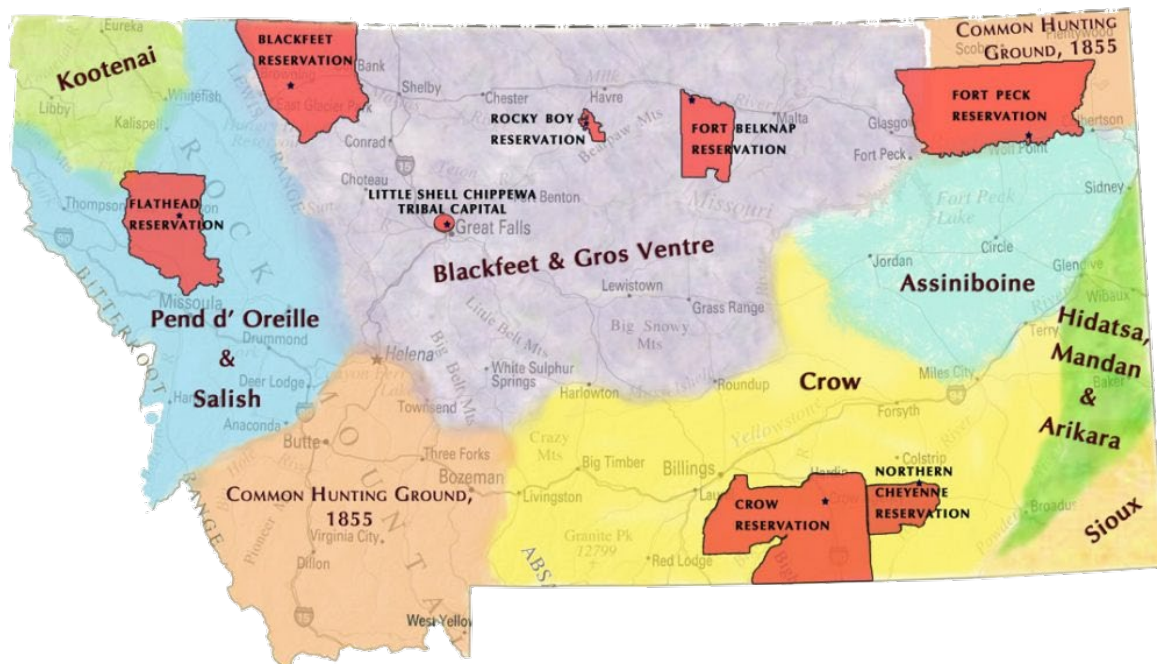


# Crazy Mountain Cathedral

By Shane Doyle, EdD

Hello Montana students!

Itchik dalam! (Apsaalooké greeting pronounced “it-chick da-loam”) It is good that you are here! I’m very happy you have chosen to learn about the Native American people of Montana. There is a lot to learn about, so let us get started. This lesson is designed to help you understand a little more about the remarkable culture of Apsaalooké (Crow) Nation, whose reservation is in southeastern Montana. Here is a map you can use for reference:



We are living through challenging times right now with the COVID-19 virus, and it may seem we are very unlucky and are suffering by missing out on so many different things. But a quick look at history reveals our ancestors have always persevered in the face of hardship, tragedy, and catastrophic loss. Native American people have certainly survived through some hard times and like people all over the world, they have turned to their spiritual traditions to help them connect to a higher power for strength and guidance. Religious traditions are unique and special in every community, and the nations of Montana have many special traditions that are very similar, but also different, as we are told in Essential Understanding 1, tribal diversity. Essential Understanding 3 – culture, spirituality, traditions - reminds us that Native American cultural heritage continues in many ways into the present day. One of those traditions is ceremonial fasting in the mountains of Montana. The Crazy Mountains, in south-central Montana, are regarded as a sacred ceremonial fasting area to the Apsaalooké (Crow). In other



Indian Education for All Unit

opi.mt.gov Montana Office of Public Instruction

words, the Apsaalooké considered the mountain range to be like a church, where people go to give thanks, ask for assistance, and pray to the Creator, known as Ahk-baa-dat-dia. This special connection between the people and the mountains is one example of many instances in Montana where one or more Native American nations has a special ceremonial connection to a mountain range, something you can learn about in another lesson. [This 8-minute video](#) tells about the special and ancient spiritual connection the Apsaalooké people have with the Crazy Mountains.

Thank you for watching the film. Now take some time to reflect and think about what you just saw and heard. Read the passage below and then answer the questions on the summary page.

## Reflection

The film describes some of the most well-known aspects of the ceremonial history of the Crazy Mountains. Plenty Coups was a famous chief who received an important dream when he fasted on Crazy Peak when he was just nine years old. It was not his first time fasting without food or water in the mountains, as he had first undertaken this ceremony when he was only seven years old. Looking back on his accomplishments today, it seems impossible in many ways, and would never even be an option for a child in the modern era. After traveling miles on horseback, Plenty Coups and three of his friends arrived at the Crazy Mountains and performed a sweat lodge ceremony, praying and cleansing themselves before they climbed the 11,000-foot rocky peaks in just moccasins and light clothing. Once the boys arrived on their chosen peaks, they stayed there alone without food, water, or shelter, for four days and nights, praying and asking for spiritual gifts and guidance. The four boys all performed the grueling and difficult ceremony, but only Plenty Coups was gifted with a prophetic dream. His dream provided his community, the Apsaalooké Nation, with the wisdom and guidance on how to move forward in the face of a quickly changing world.

Two very important lessons were learned by the Apsaalooké people from Plenty Coups' dream. First, the dream showed him that all the buffalo would soon disappear and that his tribe would also die if they did not accept the new reality and figure out how to survive without their most important resource. The buffalo provided the food, clothing, and shelter for Native Americans who lived in Montana and without them their way of life was impossible. Secondly, the dream convinced the tribe they should never wage a war against the incoming settlers, as it would be very bad for everyone and the tribe could not win. There were other amazing aspects to Plenty Coups' dream in the Crazy Mountains, but these two themes were the most essential aspects.

Many famous Apsaalooké people have received visions in the Crazy Mountains, including a man named Arapooish (Sore Belly). It is said that when he fasted on Crazy Peak, lightning struck the ground in front of him, giving him powerful medicine for his life. He used the experience to paint an image for his war shield. Check out this [picture of the famous shield](#).

Fasting in the Crazy Mountains continues into the present day. As we learned from the Essential Understanding 3, Native American cultural practices are still maintained by many tribal members. I was inspired to fast there by some of my biggest influences, listening to stories from my uncles, friends, and mentors, and I wanted to be a part of that group who had the

courage and strength to complete a fast there. Even though I had never been to them, I held the Crazy Mountains in the light of reverence because of their well-known spiritual power. When I was 21 years old, I sought the help of my elders to venture into them to go pray without food and water. My uncle and a mentor helped me to prepare mentally and physically, telling me what to expect and how to maintain my poise and focus during the fast. They gave me cedar leaves, bear root, sage, and a ceremonial pipe with a small amount of tobacco to pray with in the morning and at night. The experience was a difficult challenge, but I feel fortunate for my experience, and it has helped me throughout my adult life in many ways. I have been able to share my experience with loved ones over the years, and it has helped my family and community in ways that are difficult to measure. That spring of 1993 I saw a full-circle rainbow while fasting in the mountains, a sight I have not seen before or since in the same way.

Twenty-six years later in the summer of 2019, I was asked by my sister to give my niece a ceremonial Apsaalooké name. In following with my tribal tradition, I reflected on my life and thought about the good fortune and blessings I have received, and I chose the name Sees the Full Circle Rainbow for my niece. I wanted to pass along to my niece, or in the Apsaalooké tradition my “daughter”, the spiritual medicine I received when I fasted in the Crazy Mountains many years before. Now my prayerful experience lives on in her name. I hope and pray my tribe never loses this tradition and that young people can turn to it for wisdom and purification when they need it most.

## Awaxaawippíia: The Crow Nation's Sacred Ties (Reflections on the film)

What did you learn from the film and how did it make you feel?

Do you think this ancient ceremony is something worth protecting? Why or why not?

Why do you think the Apsaalooké (Crow) people chose to fast on the high mountain peaks of the Crazy Mountains?

Why didn't they go to a safer, easier place?

Why do you think they fasted without both water and food?

Are cultural traditions important? Why or why not?

Do you think the Crazy Mountains should have special protection because of their ceremonial use? Why or why not?

What other questions do you still have about the spiritual tradition in these mountains?



Dr. Shane Doyle is an educational consultant and member of the Apsaalooké (Crow) Nation. His Apsaalooké name means Old Buffalo Bull, and he lives in Bozeman with his wife, Megkian, and their five children.