



Sacrifice Cliff and a Deadly Pandemic

By Shane Doyle, EdD

Hello Montana students!

Itchik dalom! (Apsaalooké greeting pronounced “it-chick da-loam”) This means, “It is good that you are here!” We are living through historic times in 2020, and that makes it extra important to study history and learn about the other moments in time when our ancestors faced tremendous challenges and overcame them through the strength of family, community, and individual faith. Making sacrifices is a natural and necessary part of everyone’s life. Sometimes we must make small sacrifices, and sometimes we must give up more than we would choose, or want to, in order to achieve a more important goal for everyone, and in doing so we benefit ourselves much more in the long run. The two Essential Understandings to keep in mind when you are doing this lesson are EU3 – tribal oral histories are still told and remembered, and EU6 – Native Americans have their own unique historical perspectives.

This lesson provides us with an unforgettable story about a pandemic that occurred during the 1800s here in Montana, including one camp along the Yellowstone River. It happened where present-day Billings is located, during the 1830s, when an extremely deadly virus was spreading through and devastating many Native communities, including the Apsaalooké (Crow) Nation. The virus was called smallpox, and like many other viruses it started across the Atlantic Ocean and was brought to America by sick people who traveled here and passed it along when they interacted with tribes while trading merchandise. Smallpox was extremely lethal, killing around 90% of the Native American people who became sick with it. All total, smallpox and other viruses like typhoid, typhus, and diphtheria killed over half the Apsaalooké Nation in the 1800s, reducing their population from around 10,000 in 1780 to about 3,000 by 1850. There were three major smallpox outbreaks in the Apsaalooké community, the first in 1790, then again in 1825, and the last major wave in 1837. During these times of sickness and suffering, the tribe understood the importance of physical distancing and isolation in order to protect from continued disease transmission. Larger groups split up into smaller bands and families isolated themselves for months at a time. This practice of separation helped the tribe survive through the devastating illness. Today, almost 200 years later, people around the world are still using the same strategies to keep safe from viruses. Here is a [resource from PBS](#) where you can learn more about how disease pandemics killed most Native Americans after contact with Europeans in 1492.

The Apsaalooké people understood how diseases were passed from person to person, and this might be one explanation behind the famous story of the Sacrifice Cliff; the men who gave their lives out of their grief and despair, may also have meant to spare others in their tribe the same fate.

Read this [story in the Billings Gazette](#) newspaper; it will provide some information about the interesting history behind the legendary Sacrifice Cliff in Billings, Montana.

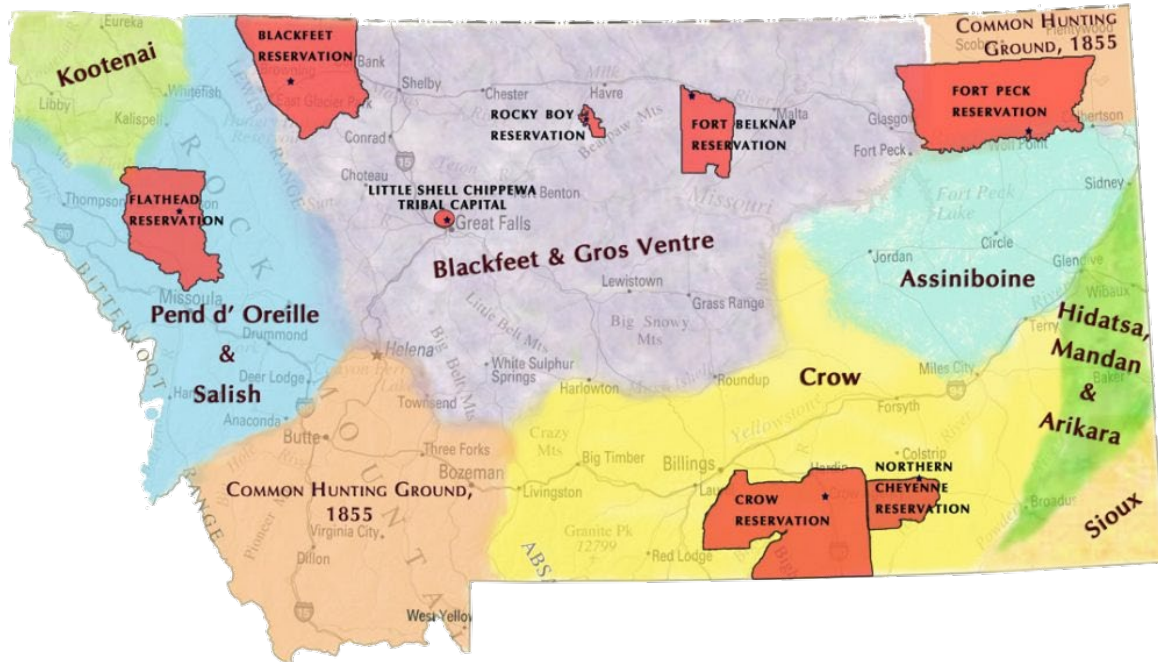


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Check out this [high-resolution image](#) of Sacrifice Cliff to get a perspective of the area.

The map below will help you identify where the city of Billings is located and the historic homeland and original reservation of the Apsaalooké (Crow) people (in yellow). Sacrifice Cliff is in the middle of traditional Apsaalooké territory.



To learn about the origins of the small pox epidemic of 1837 and the impact on other tribes check out this [resource from the North Dakota Historical Society](#). It details how the outbreak of smallpox on the Upper Missouri River killed approximately 90 percent of all Mandans and one-half of the Arikaras and Hidatsas.

Although smallpox probably killed many millions of people over time, a cure was discovered by an English scientist named Edward Jenner in 1796. The cure, now known as a vaccine, went on to eventually eradicate the disease in the 1970s. Now the smallpox virus only exists as small samples in highly secured laboratories. You can read more about the history of vaccines at this [website](#).

Sacrifice Cliff: A Tragedy for the Ages

Use what you learned from this lesson to answer the following questions.

- 1) What does the article from the Billings Gazette tell you about the Apsaalooké (Crow) and their connection to Sacrifice Cliff? How does Mardell Plainfeather describe the event and what does this tell you about the terrible grief that enormous loss can cause?
- 2) List some of the differences and similarities between the 1837 smallpox outbreak in Montana and the 2020 Covid-19.

Differences

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

Similarities

- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.
- j.

- 3) What are some of the sacrifices you have made in order for your family, friends, school, and community to persevere through the COVID-19 pandemic?

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.