

DIRECTION

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Land of Nakoda

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FIRE-BEAR, Assiniboine Indian, who has illustrated the book about his people, LAND OF NAKODA.

So you think you know all about Indians?

It's entirely understandable. Almost any tourist who takes the streamlined speedsters to the West, or who climbs into the family car for a tour of the highways believes the same thing. Anthropologists who have made a study of Indians occasionally come to similar conclusions. Even natives of the West who live among them get that idea now and then, until some experience snaps them out of it. But actually, even the Indian doesn't understand himself, only he's smart enough, or simple enough, not to try.

That's why, when the Montana WPA Writers' Project produced its book, *Land of Nakoda: The Story of the Assiniboine Indians*, as the first of a series dealing with several tribes, that we tried a new technique in letting the Indian tell his own story.

I remember one time when I was visiting the Black-foot Indians at Browning, Montana.

Cecile Blackboy, a full-blood Indian woman who was working on our project gathering Blackfoot Indian legends, had introduced us around so that we knew most of the Indians we joined in front of the teepee. One of the Indians was much interested in anthropology and had been making an amateur study into his own tribe. He was much respected by the other Indians as a man of letters among his own people. He had once aided some professors, making a similar study, and he was discussing their viewpoint. The consensus was that professors are somewhat silly, especially in their questions.

What particularly perturbed the Indians was the professors' research into their sex life. The anthropologist quoted some of the questions and one Indian asked, "What did they expect? We do it the same as anyone else."

It was quite an interesting discussion and if it were not for the bronze skins and the painted circle of teepees with their complement of dogs and children, it would be hard to believe that it was an Indian encampment. The discussion was broken up by the arrival of a member of the Indian police, who was delivering notices for the Indian Agency.

The policeman was a young, efficient chap who went about his business confidently and intelligently. He wore bibless overalls, called Levis, a black shirt, open at the throat, and a big black hat. The only distinguishing article of dress was a silver-plated star on the breast pocket of his shirt. He offered us a ride back to town in his car, so we joined him.

We were reaching the first rows of houses on the outskirts of Browning when we passed a very old, wrinkled Indian plodding along the side of the road. His suit hung like a sack and his large black hat and

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his shoes were grey-coated from the dust that swirled up from the sun-baked road. Except for the way he wore his hat with the crown uncreased and pushed straight up, and the feather in his hat band, he might have been just another tired old farmer.

The Indian policeman slowed his car and pointed excitedly. "See that man? That's Weasel Head. He's the Medicine Man."

The old man looked neither to the right or left as he wearily made his way toward the camp. The policeman continued:

"Some people think he's a great man. That he can cure them of things. That he can do magic. But I don't believe in that sort of thing. I'm an educated Indian," he added proudly. Then, he lowered his voice.

"That man's no medicine man," he said cautiously. "He's a devil. You'd know he's a devil, if you saw him do what I saw. There was a girl last winter who was sick, and they called Weasel Head when the Agency doctors said she was going to die. Weasel Head picked up red hot rocks in his bare hands and blew steam off them at her. She lived and she's up and around today."

When I got to my room in the hotel, I was still thinking. You think you understand the Indian and then something like that happens. You get an Indian interpreter like the Blackfoot policeman to explain things, and what happens? There's still the element of mystery. Maybe, the old Indians are right. They don't try to find the explanation. They just tell what is.

Anyway, it's their story.

And so it is with the *Land of Nakoda*, which the Writers' Project in Montana has produced. It's their book. Using the services of First Boy, a talented half-blood Indian, as research worker and writer, and of Fire Bear, a full-blooded Assiniboine artist as illustrator, a full and authentic story has been produced, which ranks with the finest source and folk material that the Writers' Project has added to the American record.