

Blood on the Marias

Understanding Different Points of View Related to the Baker Massacre of 1870

Grade level

7th–12th grade

Time needed

One to three days

Standards correlation

The activity that follows reflects the Essential Understandings regarding Montana Indians and the Montana Social Studies Content Standards as developed by the Montana Office of Public Instruction. The exercise will align with Essential Understandings 3, 5, and 6, and with 8th Grade Social Studies Content Standards 1.2, 1.3, 2.6, 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.6, 4.7, and 6.5.

Approach and purpose

This flexible one- to three-day activity is intended to supplement topics addressed in Chapter 7 of the Montana Historical Society’s middle school Montana history textbook, *Montana: Stories of the Land*. It has been designed to be adapted to a variety of lengths and approaches in order to maximize its usefulness for the classroom teacher. If you do not have copies of the textbook, you can download a pdf version of Chapter 7 from the *Montana: Stories of the Land* website: <http://mhs.mt.gov/education/textbook/Chapter7/Chapter7.asp>.

The activity relies strongly on oral and written primary source materials. This will challenge students to appreciate the complexity of the past while developing higher-level thinking skills. The goal of this activity is to challenge youngsters to grapple with historical evidence and to better recognize the complexity of native-white encounters in the later nineteenth century. In considering a variety of historic documents, students will have an opportunity to raise questions

and draw some meaningful conclusions about a historically significant event in Montana’s past. Students will be encouraged to find collaborative evidence, discrepancies, and bias in the source materials and will consider whether some types of historical records are more relevant and/or accurate than others. Summary questions will facilitate a wrap-up discussion that centers on the challenges in interpreting controversial historical events and the complexities in considering a multidimensional approach to the past.

Through this activity, students will:

- ▶ demonstrate comprehension of class readings
- ▶ articulate persuasive arguments in class discussions
- ▶ interpret and make inferences from historical documents
- ▶ work effectively with other students
- ▶ demonstrate effective oral presentation skills
- ▶ analyze the quality of information used to support an argument.

Activity description

In this activity, students will consider the Baker (also known as Marias) Massacre, a tragic event in which soldiers from Fort Ellis under the command of Major Eugene Baker mistakenly attacked the Piegan camp of Chief Heavy Runner on January 23, 1870. Although Heavy Runner’s band had enjoyed generally friendly relations with whites, a hasty count by Baker’s men showed 173 dead (mostly women and children), with 140 women and children captured, while only one cavalryman died, after falling off his horse and breaking his leg.

Several differing accounts of the event will be examined in this activity, including an official military report and oral histories from Blackfeet witnesses. In addition, students will examine two newspaper editorials regarding the occurrence—one from the perspective of local whites who benefited from this “pacification” of the Blackfeet, and another from the perspective of an eastern publication with far greater sympathies toward the plight of the Blackfeet people in the early 1870s. Viewed together, these documents shed a great deal of light on the ways in which one historic event can be viewed quite differently from multiple perspectives.

■ Day 1 (Analyzing and discussing the documents)

The class will be divided into five groups. Each group will read one of the five documents regarding the Baker Massacre described above. **[Documents 1–5]** Once all members of the group have read their assigned document, the group will assign a secretary and cooperatively complete the Baker Massacre Document Analysis Sheet **[Worksheet 1]**, which asks the following questions:

- 1) What is the essential information contained in this document?
- 2) To what extent does the information contained within this document validate or contradict the textbook’s account of the Baker Massacre?
- 3) To what extent is this document biased? Why?
- 4) Is this a reliable historical document? Can the information in this document be trusted or believed? Why or why not?

Once they have thoroughly discussed their assigned readings and completed the worksheet, the class will reassemble into a single group. Members of each of the groups will report on their assigned document as it relates to the four questions above. The instructor will

record student thoughts and comments on the board, and students will copy these comments into their notes because they will be needed for tonight’s writing assignment. The teacher will then facilitate a wrap-up discussion. Possible questions include the following:

- 1) What “facts” are generally agreed upon in all of the accounts?
- 2) Are some accounts less biased and more reliable than others? Why or why not?
- 3) In what respects do Bear Head’s accounts confirm and/or contradict the information contained in the Official Military Report?
- 4) What factors might account for the discrepancies in Bear Head’s two accounts? Are these differences significant enough to discredit Bear Head’s information?
- 5) Why are the newspaper editorials from 1870 so completely different in tone and position? What factors might explain these differences?
- 6) What are the advantages and disadvantages of written and oral accounts from the perspective of the historian? Why is neither account more or less valid than the other?

HOMEWORK

For homework the night after day one, students will be asked to reflect on the Baker Massacre and its significance. Using their notes from the class discussion, students will write a one- to two-page response (due the next day) to the following questions:

Based on your reading of the text and the document, as well as class discussions, what conclusions have you drawn regarding the Baker Massacre? How do you feel about this complicated event?

■ Day 2 (Wrap-Up)

The instructor will invite students to share their writing from the previous night’s home-

work. Constructive comments and questions regarding expressed student opinions should be encouraged. Students with differing perspectives should also be encouraged to share their writing with their classmates.

In the time remaining, the teacher will lead a wrap-up discussion on the Baker Massacre. Some possible wrap-up questions include the following:

- 1) Why is identifying the “real story” behind a controversial historical event sometimes difficult?
- 2) What are some possible challenges and pitfalls for a historian who is attempting to be fair and accurate?
- 3) Is history just “the facts”? To what extent do opinion, interpretation, and memory play a legitimate role in history?

Assessments

Assessments for the discussions above can be formal or informal. Teachers may grade worksheet 1 as a way of assessing the group analysis process. Additional fact-based questions can be added for each document, if desired. Instructors can then follow up with an in-class discussion, if time permits. Written questions and/or the discussion can be based on the thoroughness and accuracy of the responses. The formal writing assignment can be graded on a standard 6+1 writing traits rubric.

Extension ideas/alternative assessments

- ▶ Write a balanced newspaper account that accurately portrays the Baker Massacre with as little bias as possible.
- ▶ Write a newspaper editorial that takes a definite stand about the Baker Massacre.
- ▶ Go to the Web site www.dickshovel.com/parts2.html. Use some of the additional transcripts to create a one-act play about the Baker Massacre.

- ▶ Create a work of art—a sculpture, a mural, a poem, a song, and so forth—with the Baker Massacre as the central focus.

Further information

Bennett, Benjamin A. *Death, Too, for The-Heavy-Runner*. Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing, Co., 1982.

Ege, Robert J. *Tell Baker to Strike them Hard; Incident on the Marias, 23 Jan. 1870*. Bellevue, NE: Old Army Press, 1970.

Gibson, Stan, and Jack Hayne. “Witnesses to Carnage: The 1870 Marias Massacre in Montana.” www.dickshovel.com/parts2.html (accessed May 2, 2007).

Montana Historical Society. *Not in Precious Metals Alone : A Manuscript History of Montana*. Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1976.

Schultz, James Willard. *Blackfeet and Buffalo: Memoirs of Life among the Indians*. Norman: University Of Oklahoma Press, 1962.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. “Learning by Being: Drama as Total Immersion.” *Voices from the Middle* 6, no. 2 (December 1998): 3–10.

About this activity

Derek Strahn, a high school teacher in Bozeman, Montana, developed this activity in 2006. It was reviewed by Blackfeet tribal member Darrell Kipp, founder of the Piegan Institute in Browning, Montana. Funding for this project was provided by the Indian Education Division of the Montana Office of Public Instruction.

Document 1

Excerpt: Official Report of the Military Department of Dakota in Reaction to Criticism in the East Regarding the Baker Massacre of Heavy Runner's Band on the Marias River, January 23, 1870

As is known to the authorities, certain bands of the Blackfeet Nation, generally living in the extreme Northern unsettled portion of Montana or just north of the National Boundary in the British Possessions, had for two or three years prior to this event, been a consistent terror to the settlers, especially of the Gallatine Valley. On frequent occasions during this period their war parties had dashed into the settlements and after killing the inhabitants of . . . exposed ranches . . . and burning the houses, had easily made their escape through the passes in the "Little Belt Range" driving before them all the stock they could collect. In general all efforts to overtake them and recover the stolen stock were fruitless.

Their severe chastisement had long been a positive public necessity . . . On the morning of the 23rd of January, [an expedition under Maj. E. M. Baker] surprised and attacked a Camp of the Piegans band of Blackfeet located on the Marias river to the northwards of Fort Benton. One hundred and seventy three Indians were killed, over one hundred women and children and three hundred Indians captured . . .

It is to be regretted that in the attack on the Camp, some women and children were accidentally killed but the number was very greatly overstated in the newspaper account published throughout the country, emanating from

unreliable sources of information in Montana. As is well known to all acquainted with Indian fighting, a certain proportion of accidental killing will always occur in affairs of this kind, especially when the attack is made in the dim light of early morning and when it is a necessary element of success, to fire in the lodges at the outset to drive the Indians out to an open contest. It is believed that not a single woman or child was killed by our own people outside of the lodges, although, as is also well known a good many of the women on such occasions fight with and as well as the men. From the most reliable information I have been able to obtain I am satisfied less than forty of the number killed were women and children . . .

As much obloquy [humiliation] was heaped on Major Baker, his officers and men owing to the exaggerations and misstatements published in relation to the number of women and children killed, I think it only justice to him and his command that the truth should be made fully known to the public. Recollecting the season of the year in which the expedition was made, the terrible cold through which it marched day after day, and the spirit with which the troops engaged an enemy whom they deemed as strong as themselves, I think the command is entitled to the special commendation of the Military authorities and the hearty thanks of the nation . . .

Source: Military Department of Dakota, report, 1870, Heavy Runners Heirs' Claim Records (microfilm copy), Montana Historical Society, as quoted in Montana Historical Society, *Not in Precious Metals Alone: A Manuscript History of Montana* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1976), 60–61.

Document 2

Excerpt: Bear Head's Account of the Baker Massacre (1915)

Our camp was on the Marias River; Heavy Runner was the chief of this camp. Most all of the able-bodied men were out on the hunt, leaving only the women and old people in the camp. Myself and about ten other boys were sent out to round up the camp horses in the morning. After we had got the horses all rounded up, we cut the bunch in two, the better to handle them . . .

When we . . . had got them in sight of the camp and were on top of a ridge, we saw approaching on another ridge quite a little distance away many rides and wagons . . . When we saw them to be soldiers all of the boys became frightened and all of them except myself made off in the opposite direction.

I alone stayed with the horses. When the soldiers came up to me, one of them pointed his gun at me and made as if to shoot but, evidently seeing that I was a boy, did not do so. I called out 'How' to him, to which he responded 'How,' and kept on going but the next soldier who came up caught my horse by the rein and led it along with him with me still on the horse's back . . .

By this time we could see the main body of the soldiers approaching the camp and getting off their horses . . . which some of them held while the rest scattered out into line . . . We could plainly hear the sound of their guns and see the smoke as they began firing into the camp.

When the party who had me with them came up to the ones who were firing into the camp, I tried

to get off my horse and go into the camp, but they held me back and made signs to me to stay where I was or they would kill me. One man said, in Blackfoot, "Is this Mountain Chief's camp?" I told him, "No, his camp is further down. This is Heavy Runner's camp." He replied, "That is strange, we have two Indians with us who told us that this is Mountain Chief's camp." So I said, "Let us go over to them." We went over to where they were—two Blood Indians with their wives and they were being guarded by a soldier . . .

The man who spoke Piegan again asked me if it was not true that this was Mountain Chief's Camp and I again told him no, this is Heavy Runner's Camp. By this I knew that these two Blood Indians had misdirected the soldiers to Heavy Runner's camp instead of to that of Mountain Chief . . . I heard one of them say to the other, "I told you that if we took them to Mountain Chief's camp they would turn us loose, but you said if we took them to the first camp we would be allowed to go the sooner." One of the Blood women spoke up and said, "We were to take them to Mountain Chief's camp, and they told us that when they got through with Mountain Chief's Camp they would give us what horses and other stuff there was left as our pay."

After the soldiers had made their camp and the one who was guarding me gave me a cup to go [to] the river for water and as I went . . . to where there was a hole cut in the ice, I saw the body of "Black Eagle" lying on the ice, and just above him lay the body of Chief Heavy Runner. The soldier gave me some food and made signs to me . . . to run away which I did as fast as I could. I went to our lodge, which was also Heavy Runner's lodge and which had not been burned and where the soldiers had taken all of the wounded Indians. All

of the lodges except this and one other had been burned and all of the robes and subsistence of the camp and everything else which belonged to the camp had been burned. The soldiers camped there for a couple of days and when they moved away, they took with them all of the Horses . . .

Source: Bear Head, statement, 1915, Heavy Runners Heirs' Claim Records (microfilm copy), Montana Historical Society, as quoted in Montana Historical Society, *Not in Precious Metals Alone: A Manuscript History of Montana* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1976), 60–61.

Document 3

Excerpt: The Baker Massacre (Told by Bear Head, a Survivor, circa 1935)

Apikuni, how fast we old ones are dying off. Of those of us who survived the massacre of a great camp of our tribe by the white soldiers, sixty-five winters ago, only four are now alive . . . I am going to tell you again of that terrible wrong that we suffered, and I want you to write it for the whites to read; for the whites of this time to learn what their fathers did to us. . .

As the winter wore on the buffalo herds drifted farther and farther away from the mountains, and we had to follow them or starve. We moved down to Bear [Marias] River and camped in a bottom that Mountain Chief's band had just left, they going a little way farther down the river. It was an unhappy time: the whites had given us . . . their terrible white-scabs disease [smallpox], and some of our band was dying. And the buffalo herds remained so far out from the river that we had to go for a two or three days' hunt in order to get meat for our helpless ones. One evening I arranged to go on a hunt with a number of our band . . . Came morning and I set out for my horses [but I] could not find them on the plain. [I] sought them in the timbered bottoms of the valley [but I] did not come upon them until late in the day. The hunting party had long since gone . . .

On the following morning I found my horses in the timber well above camp and was nearing it with them when, suddenly, I ran into a multitude of white men: seizers [soldiers]. I was astonished, so frightened, that I could not move. One of the seizers came and grasped my arm; spoke; tapped his lips with his fingers: I was not

to speak, shout. He was a chief, this seizer, had strips of yellow metal on his shoulders, had a big knife, a five-shots pistol. He made me advance with him; all of the seizers were advancing. We came to the edge of the camp; close before us were the lodges. Off to our right were many more seizers looking down upon them. It was a cold day. The people were all in their lodges, many still in their beds. None knew that the seizers had come.

A seizer chief up on the bank shouted something, and at once all of the seizers began shooting into the lodges. Chief Heavy Runner ran from his lodge toward the seizers on the bank. He was shouting to them and waving a paper writing that our agent had given him, a writing saying that he was a good and peaceful man, a friend of the whites. He had run but a few steps when he fell, his body pierced with bullets. Inside the lodges men were yelling; terribly frightened women and children screaming—screaming from wounds, from pain as they died. I saw a few men and women, escaping from their lodges, shot down as they ran. Most terrible to hear of all was the crying of little babies at their mother's breasts. The seizers all advanced upon the lodges, my seizer still holding firmly to my arm. They shot at the tops of the lodges; cutting the bindings of the poles so the whole lodge would collapse upon the fire and begin to burn—burn and smother those within. I saw my lodge go down and burn. Within it my mother, my almost-mothers, my almost-sisters. Oh how pitiful were their screamings as they died, and I there, powerless to help them!

Soon all was silent in the camp, and the seizers advanced, began tearing down the lodges that still stood, shooting those within them who

were still alive, and then trying to burn all that they tore down, burn the dead under heaps of poles, lodge-skins, and lodge furnishings; but they did not burn well.

At last my seizer released my arm and went about with his men looking at the smoking piles, talking, pointing, laughing, all of them. And finally the seizers rounded up all of our horses, drove them up the valley a little way, and made camp.

I sat before the ruin of my lodge and felt sick. I wished that the seizers had killed me too. In the center of the lodge, where the poles had fallen upon the fire, it had burned a little, then died out. I could not pull up the lodge-skin and look under it. I could not bear to see my mother, my almost mothers, my almost sisters lying there, shot or smothered to death . . .

From the timber, from the brush around about, a few old men, a few women and children came stealing out and joined me. Sadly we stared at our ruined camp; spoke but little; wept. Wailed wrinkled old Black Antelope: "Why, oh why had it to be that all of our warriors, our hunters, had to go out for buffalo at this time. But for that, some of the white seizers would also be lying here in death."

"One was killed. I saw him fall," I said.

"Ah, only one seizer. And how many of us? Mostly women and children; newborn babies. Oh, how terribly cruel are the white men," Old Curlew Woman wailed.

"Killed us off without reason for it; we who have done nothing against the whites," said old Three Bears, and again we wept . . .

That night the white seizers did not closely watch the hundreds of horses that they had taken from us. We managed to get back about half of the great herd and drive them down to Moun-

tain Chief's camp. During the day our buffalo hunters returned. With many horses loaded with meat and hides, they came singing, laughing down into the valley, only to find their dear ones dead under their ruined lodges. The white killers had gone, turned back whence they came. As best we could we buried our dead—a terrible, grieving task it was—and counted them: fifteen men, ninety women, fifty children. Forty-four lodges and lodge furnishings destroyed, and hundreds of our horses stolen. *Haiya! Haiya!*

Source: Bear Head, as related to James Willard Schultz (Apikuni), *Blackfeet and Buffalo: Memories of Life among the Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962).

Document 4

**Excerpt: "Sheridan and the Indians,"
Journal of the Anti-Slavery Society [from
the *New York Evening Post*], March 19,
1870, 1.**

We must express our absolute horror at the cold-blooded massacre of women and children—ninety women and fifty young children—perpetrated by the United States soldiery in Montana recently, and of which General Sheridan has just made a report. None of the atrocities committed by the Indians, as related by General Sheridan, furnish any excuse for this indiscriminant carnage, this slaughter of the unarmed, the helpless and the innocent. There is nothing like it in the annals of our country, badly as we have behaved toward the aborigines, and it with infinite shame and sorrow that we record in our columns an event which will leave so dark a stain on our history . . . If the government allows itself to be responsible for the act of Gen. Sherman, by whose order it was perpetrated, it will be responsible for innocent blood . . .

"In Montana," said an excellent and humane gentleman in our hearing once, "there are no good Indians but dead Indians." That sums up the result of our treatment of these poor savages. We corrupt them, destroy their hunting grounds and thus starve them, and then we shoot them. That is not worthy of our reputation as a great nation; it is not a policy that we can uphold before either man or God . . .

Document 5

Excerpt: H. N. McGuire, "The Happy Result of Col. Baker's Piegan Campaign," *The Pick and Plow* (Bozeman, Montana), July 29, 1870, 2.

Never, since Montana's first settlement, have we so long enjoyed immunity from Indian outrages. Since the severe castigation administered by Col. Baker last winter, to the red-skinned thieves and murderers, our frontiers, north, east, west, and south, have been profoundly tranquil. The Montana Pioneer now sleeps in blissful security, and, rising, looks over his increasing herds, his widening fields and ripening crops, with a feeling of hopeful contentment he never felt before. No longer are the cabin homes of Montana gloomy with uneasiness, distrust, and dissatisfaction: all are now happy, cheerful, and contented, for there are "none to molest or make afraid." Settlers now project enterprises with bolder spirit, and put forth more vigorous, determined and hopeful efforts to effect their consummation. They now feel that they can enjoy the fruits of their labor. And for all this, to whom are we indebted other than Col. E. M. Baker. Nearly six months have elapsed since he overwhelmed the Piegans on the Marias, and in all that time not a single Indian outrage has been reported—life and property everywhere have been safe . . . And how was it before that time? Every week, almost every day, the red devils were busy slaughtering, burning and stealing. Will the howling philanthropists of the East—those who have so unsparingly abused and vilified Col. Baker and his Montana friends—give our gallant defender the benefit of the contrast? We think not, for ignorance and injustice usually go hand in hand.

