Amazing Montanans—Biographies

Natawista Ixsana

I am not famous like my husband, Alexander Culbertson. He worked for Pierre Chouteau, the fur trade businessman from St. Louis. Mr. Chouteau hired my husband to run the operation at Ft. Union. That was many miles from the big city of St. Louis. At Ft. Union, Indians, trappers and traders brought furs to the post. They were paid, and the furs went by boat south to the cities and finally into the hands of wealthy whites. My husband was very good at what he did. He made lots of money for his boss, Mr. Chouteau. My husband was smart and fair to all people, including my people - the Blackfeet Indians.

Major and Mrs. Alexander Culbertson and son Joe, circa 1863.

MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

It was often the custom of fur trappers and traders to live with native peoples. White trappers married Indian women. Their children and their children's children were called "Metis", or mixed blood. These Indian and white marriages were often business deals: the Indian woman and her family could help the trapper learn the ways of the vast mountain regions. In exchange the trapper provided his new family with food, blankets and protection.

This was my situation. My Blackfeet family was helpful to Alexander, and we were partners. Alexander and I were also family and lived together for many years. I learned his language and customs, and I entertained his friends at the fort. We had children together. Later in life when we were older and found that the fur trade was too hard for us, we moved to Illinois and lived in a small house.

White people in the city were not always kind to me. They made fun of the way I looked and dressed. They told stories of how I would set a tipi in our front yard and sleep in it. It was true. I missed my Montana home.

Alexander and I were married for forty years. Near the end we returned to Montana. I joined my people in Canada, and Alexander went south to live with our daughter. I am buried where my life began, where the mountains rise to the moon, and the wolves bay at the light.