

Frank Bird Linderman

1869 - 1938

“Sign-Talker with a Straight Tongue”

FRANK BIRD LINDERMAN (1869 – 1938) carved a notable niche in Western literature by recording faithfully Plains Indian tales, legends, and customs. And, in the end, he succeeded as a writer because “he was Doer *before* he was a Teller.”

LINDERMAN WAS BORN on September 25, 1869 in Cleveland, Ohio but moved to Montana’s Flathead Valley when he was only 16. After enjoying a variety of careers – including trapper, cowhand, assayer, newspaper editor and politician – Linderman, with his wife and three daughters, moved to the west shore of Flathead Lake in 1917. There he devoted his full attention to writing. Before his death in 1938, he published 5 volumes of traditional Native American lore, 2 trapper novels, 2 recorded Indian biographies, one volume of poetry, a juvenile nature tale, and numerous periodical pieces.

LINDERMAN HAD BEEN a friend of Montana’s Native American people since his earliest days in the state (even playing an instrumental role in the establishment of Rocky Boy’s Reservation for the Chippewa and Cree in 1916). In his writing about these peoples, Linderman proved to be a perfectionist. He diligently interviewed tribal elders, and always checked his interpreter’s translation through his expert use of sign language. Frank Linderman may have begun as an amateur ethnographer, but his publications exhibit a writer of immense integrity, clarity, and humility – an absolutely trustworthy observer and recorder, a “creative listener.”

THE “SIGN-TALKER WITH A STRAIGHT TONGUE” was adopted into the Blackfeet, the Cree, and the Crow tribes. His biography of the great Crow Chief Plenty Coups, American (1930) remains a classic that reveals the confidence placed in Linderman by Montana’s Indians. Plenty Coups concluded:

“I am glad I have told you these things, Sign-Talker. You have felt my heart, and I have felt yours.”

