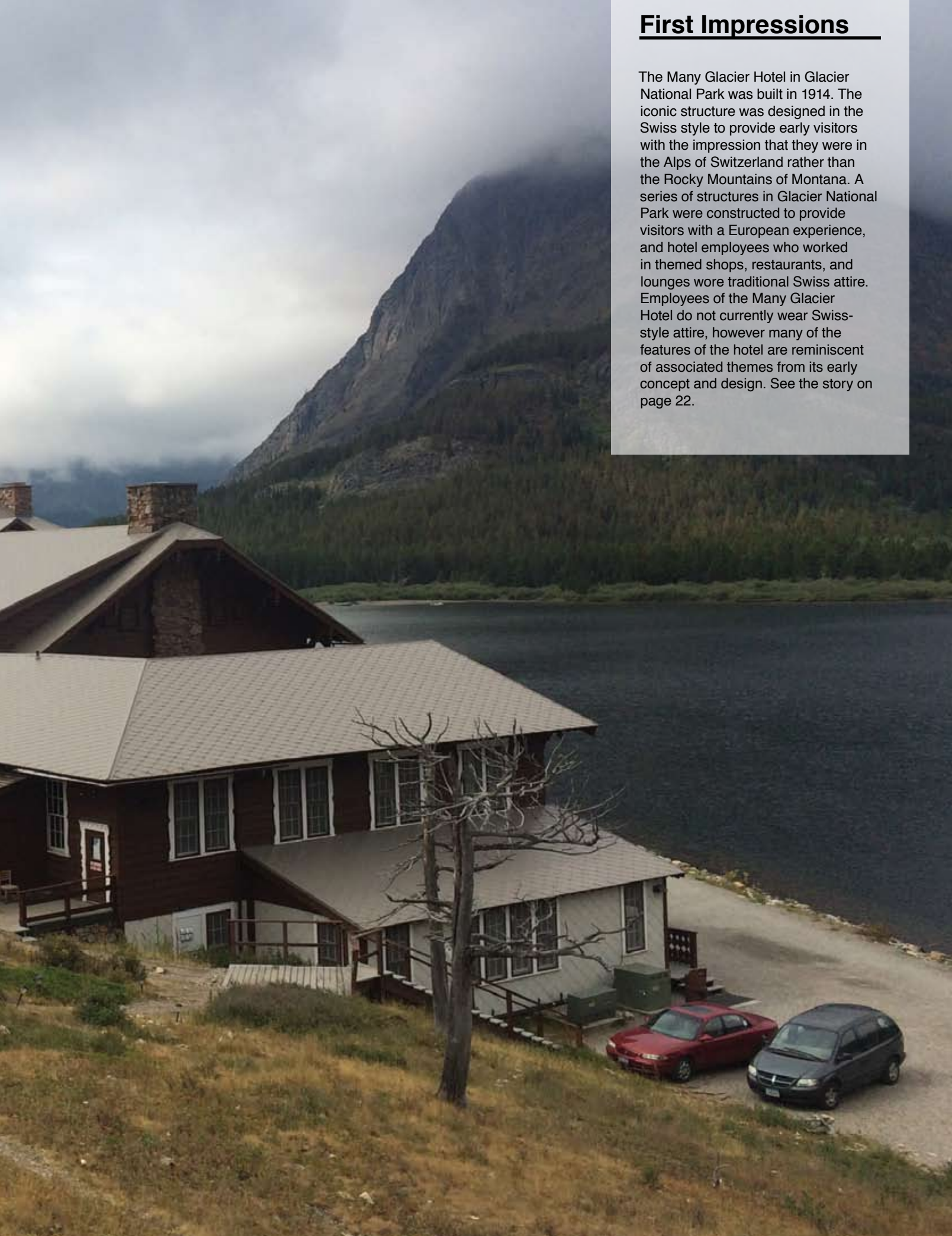




First Impressions

The Many Glacier Hotel in Glacier National Park was built in 1914. The iconic structure was designed in the Swiss style to provide early visitors with the impression that they were in the Alps of Switzerland rather than the Rocky Mountains of Montana. A series of structures in Glacier National Park were constructed to provide visitors with a European experience, and hotel employees who worked in themed shops, restaurants, and lounges wore traditional Swiss attire. Employees of the Many Glacier Hotel do not currently wear Swiss-style attire, however many of the features of the hotel are reminiscent of associated themes from its early concept and design. See the story on page 22.



Blackfeet Interpretations of Glacier National Park

BRAD HALL

The inaccuracy of cultural interpretations has been a theme within the human landscape of Glacier National Park (GNP) since the park's inception in 1910. Initially, the Blackfeet were active "attractions" within the park, as generations of families camped in tipi villages and performed for visitors; one such activity involved wearing full regalia to welcome train passengers.

Furthering visitor appeal of GNP, park developers and proponents openly compared it to the Alps. Therefore, the "Native" attractions were viewed as less relevant to the GNP brand than re-creation of the European experience. Park developers omitted local influences as they built hotels, chalets, and other infrastructure to give visitors the appearance that they were in Switzerland. It would not be until 1993 that GNP established the Native America Speaks (NAS) series to include presentations about the perspectives of tribes neighboring GNP, under the direction of former Superintendent Gill Lusk. Much of what I have covered as an NAS speaker over the years has been in direct conflict with official park narratives.

I proudly accepted the role of interpretive park ranger in GNP in 2006. As a Blackfeet person, I accepted the challenge of conveying

my cultural and historical knowledge to park visitors who did not know anything about my tribe. Early in my work, I noted the use of culturally misappropriated symbols, themes, and inauthentic "Native" commodities. For example, in hotels, non-regionally specific "Native" décor provide visitors with little information or representation of area tribes. Pan-Indian symbols, such as totem poles and southwestern motifs, do not reflect local Native cultures, support local tribal communities economically, or show any active effort to consult with local tribes to incorporate appropriate representations.

Furthermore, park visitors purchase predominantly imported "Native" memorabilia such as dream catchers, jewelry, and other items that do not relate to the local cultural influences, a missed opportunity as there are many artisans among the Blackfeet and other tribes. Visitors often seek "Native" knowledge through the purchase of publications by non-Native writers who lived among the Blackfeet for short intervals of time during the early reservation period. As an interpretive park ranger and a presenter for the Native America Speaks series, I face an uphill battle to confront and resist stereotypes.

The National Park Service (NPS) interpretation framework calls upon each ranger to select a preferential



This totem pole in front of the East Glacier Park Lodge, located on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in East Glacier, is not a Blackfeet cultural symbol, as totem poles are predominant among Pacific Northwest tribes.

topic, study it, and deliver that information in a perfectly timed presentation. Many of the people I met while working for the NPS and as a NAS presenter exhibit limited knowledge about Blackfeet or even Native subject matter. I was often asked by my fellow interpretive rangers to address "Native" questions from visitors. As I answered the questions, the other rangers would attend to other duties. Their unwillingness to learn meant that what I knew was viewed as my interest, not theirs. I have found that Blackfeet knowledge is not compatible with this classical interpretation framework, as it

assumes that an individual is an “expert” or an authority on the subject. As a Blackfeet interpreter, I do not proclaim expert status, since I am applying knowledge learned over the period of my lifetime. The tradition of Blackfeet storytelling provides a holistic approach to interpretation, which has expanded my own understanding as to how the various systems of GNP are connected.

Returning as an educator to my home reservation, I found that the Blackfeet relationship to GNP is not well understood by my fellow Blackfeet. This is a consequence of the miseducation of nearly five generations of Blackfeet people, who were never told accurate information or did not hear stories relating to the cultural significance of GNP. Lack of understanding among the Blackfeet has led to an inconsistent narrative about GNP and its relationship to the tribe. A pervasive opinion that has existed is that “Native” knowledge is not credible; therefore, as an interpretive ranger and a speaker for the NAS series, I have always felt the need to support what I say through intense study of documents. These documents, when combined with cultural knowledge passed down from generation to generation, reflect the complicated nature of the relationships between GNP and the Blackfeet.

When the Blackfeet leadership signed the Agreement of 1896 and ceded the land that would become the eastern portion of GNP and the Badger-Two Medicine area of the Bob Marshall Wilderness, they negotiated under economic and social duress. The Blackfeet leadership, as evidenced within transcriptions from the meeting between the Blackfeet Tribe and government negotiators, were quick to acknowledge the cultural and economic importance of GNP and adjacent wilderness. Tribal members remember the event as a time of great dissention among the tribe, as it was foreign to their understanding that their primary resource could be sold and bought

as a commodity. Blackfeet leaders protected their interests in GNP, by maintaining in Article I of the agreement, that the tribe reserved an easement and the hunting/gathering privileges in the lands designated, “so long as they remain public lands of the United States.”

With the establishment of GNP in 1910, the Blackfeet were no longer permitted to hunt and gather within the confines of the park, as the lands were no longer considered “public lands,” rather U.S. Government property (where hunting and other activities can be restricted). At the time of the opening of the Going-To-The-Sun Road in 1939, the Blackfeet families who had spent many years as an “attraction” for park visitors were no longer included in the interpretation of the park, only to find themselves in dire economic circumstances without a reliable income. One such head-of-household wrote to his contact in the Great Northern Railroad that his family needed money for groceries their first winter after they were deprived of working. The railroad executive’s response was to send money once and not to respond to any further requests. In 1974, three Blackfeet men exercised their rights to hunt, fish, and gather within GNP, only to

be arrested. They were later acquitted when the court upheld the Blackfeet’s reserved rights within the land designated by the Agreement of 1896.

The Blackfeet leaders approved the Agreement with the understanding that we would maintain a connection to the lands that became GNP. Although some Blackfeet names are used today within GNP, this practice is based on the non-Native notion that names are given to places for the purpose of claiming landscapes. This is contrary to the Blackfeet tradition that places were identified (or named) by their cultural context, which is dependent on the use of and reverence for a particular location. The Blackfeet perspective is often not in line with the values and norms of the NPS culture. The major difference exists in the positioning of the person in relation to the land; Blackfeet culture is intertwined with generations of experiences that pre-date GNP, whereas many rangers come from a variety of places (often other parks) without the experience or knowledge to relate their own

Many Native crafts in GNP souvenir shops are non-tribally specific or entirely inauthentic. Very few Blackfeet artisans are featured in such venues.



personal motivations to tribal perspectives. Within interpretive settings, the relationship between the GNP and the Blackfeet is often framed in the past tense, further narrowing and restricting human connections to place.

The Blackfeet word for the area is *mistakists*, which is the same term for the “backbone” of the human anatomy. Metaphorically speaking, the “backbone” of our tribe supports our ability to stand and to grow, furthermore, the “backbone” also refers to the Blackfeet’s economic reliance on the area that would become GNP; the historical series of policies contributed to adverse poverty reflected in the economic condition of the Blackfeet reservation. The dispossession of the “ceded strip” has had profound physical and psychological ramifications among the Blackfeet people, similar to those experienced by the Blackfeet with the near extinction of the buffalo, which was at one time our main food source.

Today, the Blackfeet are a vibrant and permanent fixture in the ecological framework of GNP. Numerous Blackfeet families benefit from fall migrations of ungulate herds of elk, deer, and moose to the lands on and adjacent to the park; the meat from these animals continues to feed families throughout the harsh, isolating winter months. Many Blackfeet traditionalists and spiritual leaders gather certain plants and other items from the park needed to perform ceremonies.

As an educator, I have dedicated my life and career to supporting Blackfeet youth in their educational journeys by instilling the value of our identity and its relationship to the land. I have noticed a disconnect between inquiry and experience, two primary methods of teaching that are culturally specific to the Blackfeet. Educational settings have removed nature and cultural reverence of places from the context of learning. The dispossession of the

lands that we know as eastern GNP and the Badger-Two Medicine has led to renewed interest in cultural revitalization and healing. Blackfeet students should see GNP not as “the park,” but as an integral part of their human existence. My hope is that our Blackfeet community will be provided with opportunities to engage with and utilize GNP as a source of knowledge to revitalize connections between the land and the people who revere GNP as the “Backbone of the World.”

Brad Hall is a Blackfeet educator who lives in Browning, Montana. Brad serves as the Vice President of Mission Effectiveness and Operations at Blackfeet Community College in Browning, Montana. Brad has a bachelors degree in history, masters in education, and is currently a doctoral candidate in educational leadership at Montana State University-Bozeman.

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