

NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS of the Great Plains painted animal hides in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. While women also painted hides, representational work was traditionally done by men, whose two-dimensional pictographs commonly recorded the artist's personal exploits. Each hide depicted numerous events, primarily including warriors and horses in various battles. Large hides, such as bison, deer, or elk, were often worn as robes, though they were also used in trade between nations. By the end of the nineteenth century, painters had begun selling hides to Euro-Americans.

The Minnesota Historical Society's collections contain three hides with pictographs, all made in the latter half of the nineteenth century. One of these is a large elk hide painted by Chief Three Suns, otherwise known as Big Nose, of the Piegan Blackfeet tribe of Montana. It depicts battle scenes with images of warriors, horses, tipis, and bears. What makes this hide unique is its accompanying textual explanation of each scene, including the dates and locations of the events.

Capt. Lorenzo W. Cooke, a temporary Indian agent (1893–94) on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, commissioned this hide. More than eight feet in length, it is too large to have been worn as a robe; it was meant for display. Three Suns added faint lines between the scenes, making it more comprehensible to the collector, and provided verbal explanations of the events he depicted, which Capt. Cooke wrote down.

These scenes, dated between 1845 and 1881, depict clashes with Assini-



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boine, Crow, Cree, and others, as well as activities such as hunting elk and being charged by bear. Three Suns was the son of a great warrior and in time became one himself, participating in 36 battles, killing 11 men, and being wounded 9 times. From horse theft to ambush, his career as

a warrior is detailed on this hide and vividly described in Cooke's notes.

Just two years after completing this work, Chief Three Suns died. In 1941 Capt. Cooke's son, Maj. Lorenzo Irvin Cooke, donated the hide to the Minnesota Historical Society.

—Sondra Reiersen, associate curator



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