The acquisition of the shirts by Hopkins in 1841 was part of a larger pattern of Blackfoot relationships with outsiders—relationships that were pragmatic as well as social—and so, too, was the Blackfoot Shirts Project. Like many such projects, it started slowly but gathered momentum as those involved worked together to make it happen and to address differing perspectives on how the project might take shape. As we talked through these perspectives and got to know one another better, our professional and our personal relationships shifted as we learned more about each other’s goals for the project and how best to achieve them. Given that the key advisors and project team members live on different sides of the Atlantic, the face-to-face discussions that are so crucial for nurturing such relationships and for finding ways to respond to minor tensions and differences in view tended to come in short bursts. These meetings took place in Alberta and Montana when Alison and Laura were able to take breaks from their teaching schedules and on the rare occasions that Blackfoot colleagues were
I think this was based on friendship, trust, you know? And I think we shared the same objectives, because we believed in something. And that’s the pictures. And from that it just flowed; it flowed right into the shirts, just carried into the shirts. . . . And hopefully in the future some people will pick it up and then they’ll continue on with other items that we might try and work with. It might be easier for other collectors or other museums to look at this process that we took. So, at the end, everyone contributed something to it without losing anything. In fact we all gained. Like, for us, we gained a lot. Without the pictures we wouldn’t be able to talk about those times, or the people in those pictures. Without those shirts, there probably wouldn’t be any transfers going on today. It helped the whole community.

AATSO’TOTO’AAWA (SHOT ON BOTH SIDES) / ANDY BLACKWATER

In my experience, with the exception of museums like Glenbow, a lot of them get very defensive when you bring up issues like “Who are you conserving this for? Who are you preserving this for?” And if knowledge is the goal, then let’s talk about it. Because if you are just conserving and preserving the[se things] for the sake of preserving them, then knowledge gets sacrificed. There needs to be more of an interaction. There needs to be a relationship.

TATSIKIISTAMIK / NARCISSE BLOOD
able to visit Europe before the project formally began. We supplemented these meetings as best we could through telephone conversations and through email and social media, primarily Facebook. In this chapter we outline the origins of the Blackfoot Shirt Project to explain why, and how, the project emerged. We acknowledge that our version of events—as academic researchers and museum staff—glosses over many of the nuances of this complex project, and that others associated with the Blackfoot Shirts Project will have experienced the shirts in ways we do not present here. We also acknowledge that our way of telling the project’s story in this book does not sit well with Blackfoot traditions of storytelling. As we were reminded by Frank Weasel Head when we discussed the form this book might take in a meeting in the spring of 2011:

When we tell something, we tell it in a story form, but never completely answering a question. When I go to ask my elders something they’ll tell me a great long story, but never really to the point of directly answering my question. It’s up to me to find the answer in there or go search for the answer. . . . And sometimes the story you tell is your own life, and it’s up to them to pick up the answer in there; sometimes they have to go out of that story and search someplace else.

As we present the genealogy of the Blackfoot Shirts Project here we are also mindful of the comments of Narcisse Blood, who told us that the project’s story should be presented in such a way as to encourage people to find out more. He said that “a book should never presume that it’s going to teach everything. If people want answers to questions, then they have to take that journey.” This chapter thus provides a starting point for understanding how the Blackfoot Shirts Project began.

EARLY RELATIONSHIPS IN ALBERTA

This was not a project in which we were beginning completely from scratch. Indeed, a number of relationships were already in place and taken together these provided a network of support as the Blackfoot Shirts Project developed. First, our
Visiting with the Ancestors

Blackfoot colleagues have collaborated with each other for decades on repatriation and other museum projects and have worked with a range of museum and heritage organizations (Conaty 2015). They were thus broadly familiar with how museums operate institutionally and were fully aware of the often bureaucratic nature of these organizations. In particular, many of the key individuals involved in the Blackfoot Shirts Project had worked with colleagues at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, one of our partner museums, on a range of projects related to cultural heritage that included exhibitions, repatriations, and the development of provincial repatriation legislation (Conaty 2003; Conaty 2008; Conaty and Carter 2005). Second, Glenbow staff and many of our Blackfoot advisors had a working relationship with Alison Brown that dates to the late 1990s, when she had spent several months in southern Alberta as part of her doctoral research (Brown 2000; see also Brown 2014). This research had coincided with the planning and installation of a permanent Blackfoot gallery at the Glenbow Museum. Niitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life is a space in which Blackfoot people talk about their history, their clans, their way of viewing the world, and their relationships with others. The gallery was developed by a core team of museum staff and community curators from the four Blackfoot nations (Blackfoot Gallery Committee 2001; Conaty 2003). The team allowed Alison to sit in on planning meetings and to join them on visits to sites of importance within Blackfoot traditional territory. This gave her the opportunity to start to get to know people from the four communities and to talk to them about their views on how museums might contribute to their own goals of strengthening Blackfoot ways of being. It also enabled her to learn from museum colleagues about the need for compromise when developing projects collaboratively.

Three years after first coming to Alberta, Alison began a second research project, this time working with Laura Peers. The Kainai-Oxford Photographic Histories Project was based on a collection of photographs in the Pitt Rivers Museum that were taken at the Kainai Nation in 1925 by a visiting anthropologist, Beatrice Blackwood. Although Blackwood spent only three days in the community, this project lasted several years and involved extended visits to Alberta of several months at a time for Alison and shorter visits for Laura between 2001 and 2006 (Brown et al. 2006). This project involved identifying the people in
Blackwood’s photographs, recording oral history interviews about life on the Kainai reserve in the 1920s, and learning about how such photographs can be used as educational resources. It was guided by a Protocol Agreement between the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Foundation of the Kainai Nation, a voluntary organization made up primarily of spiritual advisors from the Kainai community who have worked with museums and heritage bodies throughout North America, negotiating repatriation claims and advising on interpretation of Blackfoot culture and history. This agreement outlined the project goals and the responsibilities of the museum staff and Mookaakin Foundation board members in ensuring these goals were reached. We also received considerable support from the Red Crow Community College Elders Advisory Council, as well as from other community members interested in accessing heritage materials in their many forms. These projects are mentioned here in order to emphasize that the Blackfoot Shirts Project developed only after some years of working with local people, during which time we came to better understand what Blackfoot people considered to be respectful research practices. These visits were, in essence, part of making relationships, and they allowed us all to get to know one another in ways that extended beyond visiting in a professional capacity for the purposes of shaping a museum project. The extractive model, in which researchers come to First Nations communities and stay long enough only to meet their own goals and fail to take the time to get to know people and ask what is important to them has been harshly criticized by Indigenous people for decades. As Narcisse Blood observed in an interview with Alison during the Kainai-Oxford Photographic Histories Project, “We’re not just relics, you know, for somebody else’s benefit to earn a degree, or write about, or so forth” (Brown et al. 2006, 195).

Andy Blackwater has noted that the Blackfoot Shirts Project has “flowed” from the Kainai-Oxford Photographic Histories Project, but we would add to this that without the work of the Glenbow staff and their Blackfoot colleagues on developing the Niitsitapiisinni gallery together, and their collective guidance during Alison’s earlier research in southern Alberta, the shirts project is unlikely to have gone ahead. Just as good relations between individuals were crucial for successful trading partnerships at the time the shirts were acquired, the success
Visiting with the Ancestors

I’d seen pictures of the shirts like this, but that was Andy’s and my first encounter with shirts like this. We were amazed by them. It’s almost hard to explain, it was that emotional. And it’s still that way today. When I talk about them, I have tears in my eyes. My first thought was, how many of my people back home—and when I say “my people” I’m just talking about the Blood Tribe—we now have an approximate population almost hitting 11,000—and how many of them have seen shirts like this, from our past? And I have people that are older than me, especially the ladies that I talk to, women—because women made these things, women made the shirts—then the men might add the designs, the pictographs you might see on the shirts of their deeds, put them on themselves—but the women did the sewing, and the cutting, and everything on them. So I talked to a lot of them, and I told them, hair shirts. Most of them have just said, I’ve heard of them, but I’ve never seen them.

Frank Weasel Head

of museum-based projects in the early twenty-first century is shaped by positive relations and the willingness to take the time to get to know each other.

BLACKFOOT VISITORS TO THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

During the 1990s many Blackfoot people were developing relationships with museums in North America, but there were relatively few opportunities to get to know museum staff in Europe. One important opportunity for change happened in June 2000, when the late elder Rufus Goodstriker and Louis Soop, an educator at Red Crow Community College, visited the British Museum in London in connection with an exhibition called Ákaitapiiwa / Ancestors, which involved the loan of late-nineteenth-century Kainai materials to the Galt Museum (Brownstone 2002). They decided to make a visit to Oxford and spent an afternoon at the Pitt Rivers Museum looking at the Blackfoot collections on display as well as those in the storage areas. This was the first time any Blackfoot people had met staff at the Pitt Rivers Museum and everyone involved learned a great deal from their visit, including that there are protocols to be followed when working with Blackfoot heritage items. Rufus and Louis asked to smudge and pray before they looked at the shirts and the leggings, which had been brought out of the Textile Store for them to see. It was also the first time in over 160 years that the Blackfoot language was spoken around the shirts and even though none of the museum staff understood the words, we could sense that this was a powerful moment of reconnection for our visitors. After telling us about the materials used to make the shirts and that the designs represented war records, Rufus then spoke about the achievements of his ancestor, Stomi’ksaosa’k (Buffalo Bull’s Back Fat), who wore a shirt similar to those in the Pitt Rivers Museum for his portrait to be painted by the artist George Catlin in 1832. Rufus and Louis taught us that the shirts are not just historic artifacts. They are ancestors, with continued presence and meaning for Blackfoot people. Their visit transformed how the staff thought about the shirts and Rufus and Louis were able to return to their community and talk to people about what they had seen.
It was another three years before the Pitt Rivers Museum was able to welcome more Blackfoot visitors to see the shirts. In the spring of 2004 the travelling version of the Glenbow’s Blackfoot Gallery came to the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry. Frank Weasel Head and Andy Blackwater, who had been part of the gallery team, along with Glenbow staff Beth Carter and Sandra Crazy Bull, attended the exhibition opening and gave presentations at the museum. We invited them to Oxford to visit the Pitt Rivers Museum staff who had been involved in the Kainai-Oxford Photographic Histories project and to look at the Blackfoot collections. On the second day of their visit we went into the Textile Store. We opened one of the drawers of the cabinet where the shirts were kept and Frank and Andy looked in amazement at the shirt lying in front of them. When we told them that there were five shirts in all, they paused for a while, and Frank then said, “I have never even seen one of these kinds of shirts. Not a single one.” They then looked at different parts of the shirts and commented on particular features. Andy later recalled:

With our experience in going to different places to look at these kinds of items, Frank and myself, we got to realize that we needed to look on the inside of it. If it is a hat, or a war-bonnet or a shirt or a headdress, it’s always good to look on the inside. If there are traces of ochre, red ochre, on the inside, then that item must have been worn in a ceremony or in battle because the sacred paint was used on the individual before he wore that, the item. And that is one of the first things we looked at. We found traces of ochre on the inside of the shirts.

The next day, Frank and Andy spoke to museum staff and anthropology students about their work with museums. Frank talked about his experience of seeing the shirts and asked why it was that not only had he never seen shirts like these before but neither had anyone in his community. Andy then talked about why museum visits can be difficult: “You are holding part of us there. We don’t alienate ourselves from those items. We continue to include them in our prayers. In our community we don’t have one of those at all, at the present time.”
He explained that providing access to historic materials such as the shirts is a way of looking beyond the items themselves to consider the possibilities of knowledge regeneration and revival within the communities they are from. Together Frank and Andy issued a challenge: there are five Blackfoot shirts in the Pitt Rivers Museum, but there were no hairlock shirts of this age in Blackfoot territory. What was the museum going to do about this? On the basis of their response to these shirts, and the subsequent comments of other Blackfoot leaders, we began to raise the funds that would bring the shirts home.