The Bighorn Mountains are the most sacred area to the Crow Tribe. Apsáalooke is the tribe’s name in Crow language, which means children of the large-beaked bird. The entire mountain range is an integral part of Crow history. While these mountains have been used for hunting to ritual practice; there are also many legends told about this high country. Crow oral tradition cite the tribe under the leadership of two brothers: No Intestines and Red Scout. Even though the tribe was two separate bands they simplified together. At what is now called Devil’s Lake, the two brothers did a vision quest together. During the vision, No Intestines was told to seek the seeds of the sacred tobacco. Once he located this tobacco No Intestines and his band would be in the center of the world and this would be the best place for people. The group following No Intestines and his vision would become the Crow Tribe who currently live in southeastern Montana on Crow Nation reservation. However, Red Scout’s vision quest was to settle on the Banks of the Missouri River and grow corn. This is the separation of the Crow people from the Hidatsa tribe.

No Intestines and his band began a long westward trek. The journey west first led them to the region around what is now Montana. No Intestines fasted for a week and on the fourth day he received a second vision that the area was too cold and they had not reached their destination. The group headed south and passed Great Salt Lake in current day Utah. They headed south-east and reached the Canadian River in Oklahoma, called Arrowhead River by the Crow. No Intestines fasted again and his vision told him to travel north following the Missouri River to the Platte River. Then they followed the Powder River north until they reached the Bighorn Mountains in current day northern Wyoming.

To the Crow the highest peak on the crest of the Bighorn Mountains is called Awaaxaaskawisnii, which means Extended Mountain and the peak is considered the center of their world. No Intestines fasted for the fourth time and received a vision telling him that he was in the right place and the tobacco seed could be found at the bottom of Awaaxaaskawisnii. As he looked to the base of the mountain, he saw the seeds as “twinkling stars,” Hík’axåaxañeaxetak. Thus, the Crow made their home in the region which is now Montana and Wyoming with the Bighorn Mountains as their sacred heartland.

The Legend of Big Metal

In the days soon after the Crow came to this area, a boy and his stepfather went hunting. While the boy was looking over the edge of the cliff, he heard a noise and turned to look. He saw a group of sheep led by a large ram. He went to the village telling the others that the boy had started walking earlier in the day. A search party was sent out and when no sign of the boy was found it was assumed another tribe had captured him. However, the boys face was a mess of broken bones and blood. He was rescued by seven bighorn sheep led by Big Metal, the Chief of the Bighorns.

Big Metal was a magnificent creature with horns and hooves of glistening metal. He gave the boy his powers and his name, Big Iron. In turn, the seven sheep gave the boy a power that the sheep possessed: wisdom, sharp eyes, keen hearing, great strength, a strong heart and surefootedness. They then gave him a warning: “We seven rule these Bighorn Mountains. The rivers down there in the bottom are the Bighorn River. Whatever you do, do not change the name. It was assumed another tribe had captured him. Whatever you do, do not change the name. It is integral to our history. While these mountains have been used for hunting to ritual practice; there are also many legends told about this high country. Crow oral tradition cite the tribe under the leadership of two brothers: No Intestines and Red Scout. Even though the tribe was two separate bands they simplified together. At what is now called Devil’s Lake, the two brothers did a vision quest together. During the vision, No Intestines was told to seek the seeds of the sacred tobacco. Once he located this tobacco No Intestines and his band would be in the center of the world and this would be the best place for people. The group following No Intestines and his vision would become the Crow Tribe who currently live in southeastern Montana on Crow Nation reservation. However, Red Scout’s vision quest was to settle on the Banks of the Missouri River and grow corn. This is the separation of the Crow people from the Hidatsa tribe.

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The bighorn sheep told the boy that they would lead him out of the canyon if he promised to go back to the village and deliver the message. Big Iron was to report to the tribe what the stepfather had done. Big Iron returned to the village and upon seeing him the stepfather ran away and was never seen again. Big Iron told the story of the seven rams and what they had done for him and told him about the land. Big Iron went on to live through four generations of the Crow Tribe retelling the story of the ram to every generation.

The Bighorn River carved the Bighorn Canyon that is part of the northern range of the Bighorn Mountains located in current day Montana. Today, the Apsáalooke reside on the Crow Nation Reservation located in southeastern Montana.

For more Apsáalooke history, visit the Library at Little Big Horn College.