Circles of Culture, 1997

University of Montana–Missoula. School of Journalism. Native News Honors Project

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Montana's Indians are holding onto their past to protect their future

A Special Report by the School of Journalism

The University of Montana
Montana's Indians are holding onto their past to protect their future

As the icy April wind blew across the plains of the Fort Peck Reservation in northeast Montana, two white men stood half-frozen, awaiting the start of a cultural expedition through a land of ideas and people not their own.

Hours later the heat of a Sioux sweat lodge warmed their chilled bodies and melted the journalistic dispositions of an ex-Southern Baptist and a small-town ranch boy. The two found themselves experiencing the sweat lodge as inquisitive individuals rather than intrusive journalists attempting to record a sacred ceremony.

These two journalists and 14 others from the University of Montana took the opportunity to immerse themselves in a culture and a people not easily understood and often misrepresented. They covered stories not only of Montana's Indian tribes, but of individuals searching for a cultural engine to lead them into the 21st century. By interviewing, experiencing, and most of all, listening to Montana's Indians, the following stories emerged.

Buffalo Bird Woman tells tales of the frog in the moon, of the creation of the Earth and other stories that came before scientific explanations existed. Buffalo Bird Woman is Jeannine Eder, a perpetrator of the storytelling tradition inherent to all tribes.

Despite the many changes occurring among Montana's tribes, the art of arrow throwing is a practice that thrives as a Crow tradition. It's a custom dependent on generational ties and the identity of the arrow and its thrower.

Many of Montana's Indians both on and off the reservation find themselves walking a line between being white and being Indian. They are Indian adolescents living in a white environment, but being raised in an Indian culture. It's a line some teenagers at Fort Peck are always forced to walk without knowing where it leads.

Angie Gone walks this line at her home in Fort Belknap, a home she was kept away from as a girl but forced back to as a woman. She lives among the skeptics, the optimists and the line-walkers, trying to find certainty in the future and within herself.

Perhaps it is this uncertainty that leads to a yearning, and this yearning that leads to a culture class on the Flathead Reservation. A quest for knowledge almost 20 years ago brought three girls to Johnny Arlee, a cultural teacher, and sparked his and their search into a renewal of traditions and the significance of the bitterroot plant, a staple of Salish culture.

Today Arlee, with the help of one of those girls, now grown to adulthood, teaches a culture class on the Flathead Reservation.

Just across the Rocky Mountains of Montana, the Blackfeet language is as scarce as the bitterroot plant. But some parents have submerged their children in a cultural greenhouse, where English is discouraged, an ironic twist on a tactic the whites once forced upon the Indians. The white boarding schools of the 19th century forbade the use of any native tongue. Today, the language restriction is used to ensure a way of life rather than its eradication.

As the journalists on the plains of northeastern Montana await their journey into the uncertainty of the Sioux sweat lodge, Montana's Indians face the uncertainty of their cultural identity. And so, like others before them, they look to the past for guidance into the future — as the circles of culture continue.

A Special Report by the School of Journalism
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This is the 6th special report by the University of Montana School of Journalism on issues that affect Native Americans who reside within Montana's borders. This honors class was taught by Journalism professors Carol Ann Bassett and Patty Reksten.

Production support for this project was provided by the University of Montana Diversity Advisory Council and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Cover photo: Barney Old Coyote holds arrows used in the Crow arrow game, a competition that has long been a Crow Tribe tradition. Photo by Jordan LaRue.
When the Blackfeet people were placed on a reservation in northern Montana nearly a century ago, their language began to disappear. Today, children in a one-room schoolhouse are trying to revive it.

A lesson in language

Written by NEOMI VAN HORN
Photographed by LOGAN CASTOR

Moriah Kipp, Bobbi Jo Upham, and Katelyn Harrison warm themselves in the morning sun. The schoolhouse is lit mostly by natural light and heated primarily with solar energy.

They came with little more than their blankets to a dry, windswept field lined with drab stucco huts. Banished from the tribe by the U.S. Government nearly a century ago and isolated from the plains, the elders of the Blackfeet Reservation began to forget. Gone were their tipis and horses. Gone, too, were the buffalo. In time, even the language itself became so fragmented it began to dissolve. With the language went the heart of a culture, and soon, even the memories seemed to blow away with the wind.
Today on the same lonely field where the Blackfeet elders died, 15 children are reversing the cycle of shame by reviving the language of their ancestors.

Moccasin Flat School, a Blackfeet immersion school still in its infancy, is the first of its kind in Browning.

Inside a new, tawny-colored building, symbolically modeled after the stucco huts where their great-grandparents lived out their final days, children in Disney clothes and high-top sneakers are learning the warm, staccato tongue that, not so long ago, seemed doomed to fade away.

Beyond the Moccasin Flat School, the orange, graffiti-splattered walls of the neighboring housing projects stand out amid the dreary cookie-cutter sameness of government-issue homes.

The school is in the poorest section of Browning, a "miserable rural slum" by one historian's standards, and one of the four poorest towns in the United States.

Scuffy dogs roam the dirt streets, rutting through the garbage scattered in abundance by the unforgiving Browning winds.

The school's founders chose this plot of land on purpose, with the intent of creating a haven of learning in one of the most desolate neighborhoods in the state.

At Moccasin Flat, special care is taken to teach the children about the ancestors who died here.

Each child's picture hangs on the wall above a caption naming their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents in Blackfeet.

Underneath a sign reading "Mi natsapi yit ano inais kei ni mati toh kiyip," or "Please do not speak English in the school," each child's Indian name labels one of the blond wood lockers where they hang their coats each morning.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"No, your real name ... what's your Indian name?" she insists.

Kipp strives to celebrate the culture of his students, to repair the damage of what he sees as years of "institutional racism" in the public schools.

"One of the horrific shortcomings of public schools is the absence of anything Indian in them except the bodies of the children," he says. "Rather than producing students, they are actually damaging the people who attend their schools."

Studies of language immersion schools prove that these children will grow up with more than bilingual skills. They will score high on reading comprehension and language skills tests, as well as acquire a pride in their cultural identity.

"All my life I did really well in school and sports, but I still was pretty empty inside." says Laureen Ollinger, a petite, curly-haired young Indian. They'll have a deeper understanding of being Blackfeet.

"I believe that they won't have that struggle that I went through because I didn't know Indian. They'll have a deeper understanding than even we do."

The children of Moccasin Flat School communicate their pride in being Blackfeet in everything from the language they speak to the school grounds they walk on.

"All my life I did really well in school and sports, but I still was pretty empty inside."

"Sometime down the road these kids are going to be leaders in the community," she says. "I believe that they won't have that struggle that I went through because I didn't know Indian. They'll have a deeper understanding than even we do."

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"No, your real name ... what's your Indian name?" she insists.

"Please do not speak English in the school," founder Darrell Kipp says of the school's credo.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"No, your real name ... what's your Indian name?" she insists.

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The pain of not knowing what it means to be Indian prompted many of the mothers to return to the reservation to raise their children.

"I'll never raise my kids anywhere else," says Laureen Ollinger, a petite, curly-haired young mother who recalls the pain of being a "relocation Indian" raised off the reservation of her ancestors.

"All my life I did really well in school and sports, but I still was pretty empty inside."
Isspitaaki LaFromboise demonstrates to her class that she can count up to 20 in Blackfeet.

Only when she started taking Native American history courses did she learn more about her identity and her heritage.

She wants her children to avoid the anguish of ignorance.

"A lot of us didn't find ourselves 'til our 20s. We want to save that little pain from our children," she says.

Susan Reevis-Webber knew when her son Ian was a baby that he was destined to carry on the tribal language.

Learning Blackfeet, she says, will give him an advantage he never had.

"He'll be just one step further than me towards really being a practicing Blackfeet Indian. He will never have to search to be that marginal man. He will always be an Indian walking in a different world. Never a marginal man walking in two worlds.")

The seeds of necessity for the Moccasin Flat Language School were planted in the last decades of the 19th century, with the General Allotment Act of 1887. Also known as the Dawes Act, it was designed to give individual Indians a plot of land, but was really a veiled attempt to eradicate tribalism and fulfill the U.S. government's goal of assimilating the Indians into white culture.

An aggressive recruitment campaign for boarding schools run by Catholic and Protestant missionaries began soon after.

Parents had little power to stop their children from being taken to distant schools where missionaries cut their hair, put them in white people's clothing and taught them the "civilized" ways of modern society: sewing, cooking, and reading, speaking and writing English.

Indian agents withheld government assistance from parents who protested their children's enrollment in the schools.

Successful assimilation depended on the isolation of the children from their tribal customs and influences. In the 1890s the commissioner of Indian affairs said, "To civilize...is to educate, and to educate means breaking up of tribal customs, manners, and barbarous usages, and the assumption of the manners, usages, and customs of the superior race with whom they are thereafter to be thrown into contact."

The missionaries tried openly to erase the cultural identity of the children, especially the language. Blackfeet was forbidden in the schools. Children were punished for speaking their native tongue.

Future generations would learn to associate their language with shame and punishment. Their parents passed on a painful legacy that secured the slow death of a language. The missionary school generation that could understand but not speak the words of their parents produced a generation incapable of either. Today, there are few native Blackfeet speakers younger than 60 on the reservation.

Darrell Kipp founded the Piegan Institute in 1985 with the goal of removing the stigma of shame instilled by boarding schools. The Moccasin Flat and Cuts Wood Schools are just one project the Institute is pursuing in an effort to keep the Blackfeet language alive.

"They kept the language from us in an act of love and as an act of love, we can reconcile that," Kipp says.

Construction began in 1994 on the two language-immersion schools with the support of community, private and corporate funds, including a matching grant of $100,000 from actress Jane Fonda.

Moccasin Flat had a building, an organized philosophy and written goals when it opened, but no curriculum.

Teachers for the school were also a tough find.

Kipp eventually had to hire members of the Bloods, a Canadian branch of the Blackfeet, because there were no young, native speakers left on the reservation who were fluent enough to teach.

Head teacher Lena Little Leaf, a Blood, has had to create a language curriculum almost from scratch, including binders of work sheets, word illustrations, tapes, flash cards and laminated story books.

Sometimes, she even has to create new words.

Today, Little Leaf is busy recording vocabulary tapes for her students to take home to their parents.

She has just returned from a visit with tribal elder Francis Potts to come up with a word for "bears in spring." Because Blackfeet is an old language, Little Leaf must make up words for her students to use for modern toys and exotic animals like giraffe and hippopotamus.
Little Leaf sits in the school’s kitchen, surrounded by the books, work sheets and tapes she has helped create. “All this has boosted me up.” She picks up a heavy binder stuffed with language work sheets. “Watching all the things I’ve put together on my own without any help from anybody, that’s helped my self-esteem.”

She gazes thoughtfully at a sign in English posted to a bulletin board that reads, “Without our language, we will cease to exist as a separate people.”

Little Leaf was 4 when her mother died. When she was 5, government agents took her from her grandmother’s home to St. Paul’s Residential School, where she lived for nine years.

It was in the “dog-eat-dog” world of boarding school that Little Leaf first started wishing she were white.

By junior high, Little Leaf was conditioned against speaking her language. She remembers the humiliation of the fights and the insults; “squaw” and “dirty Indian,” and the feeling that she would never be as good as the kids with white skin.

She rejected the traditionalism of her family, married at 17 and pursued a life in the corporate world of Calgary. She rarely spoke Blackfeet. “I lived as a white person, talked as a white person,” she recalls.

“I remember feeling inferior to white people. I’ve always felt inferior to white people, until now, when I’ve gotten back into the language.”

Little Leaf fell into teaching Blackfeet by accident, but she will never forget the impact it has had on her life, self-esteem and image of herself as an Indian.

“I’ve really gained my self-respect,” she says, then purses her lips and nods thoughtfully. “My self-respect has gone back up. I’m a better person. I respect my language, I respect my culture, whereas before I didn’t. I lost that respect … I have Darrell to thank.”

For Kipp, the school is part of a personal mission to give hope to the people of Browning. Already, the local Head Start program has initiated an immersion language program, following the lead of Kipp and Still Smoking’s schools.

At the Piegan Institute in downtown Browning, Kipp stands amid an obstacle course of blue plastic buckets, placed strategically to catch the drips from the ceiling of the aging apartment complex.

He mentions how glad he is about moving the institute into offices at the new Cuts Wood School building.

He talks excitedly about the new building, which will accommodate many of the students on a waiting list that numbered more than 150.

“Our goal is to produce 1,000 speakers in 10 years,” he says.

Kipp glances out the window at a group of idle men standing in an abandoned lot across the street.

“Those people standing on the street, some of them are my relations,” he says.

Kipp sees his school as an antidote to the apathy, alcoholism and poverty that plague the people of his hometown.

“Where do we stop it? We stop it right here is schools like this. We produce these children with such an enormous sense of themselves that they would never…denigrate themselves in that way.”

He motions outside where some of the men stand staring blankly, taking occasional swigs from bottles in paper sacks.

“‘We’re trying to sober up those people over there 20 years before they fall asleep,’ he says.

Lena Little Leaf teacher

Montana’s Indians

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Without our language, we will cease to exist as a separate people.

Rovela Many Bears, prepares the monthly calendar. Every first of the month is the planning day for the teachers and parents.
"I was born three winters after that smallpox came on our people. And in the way it was in those days, when a child was born they waited 10 days and then they invited an old man to come to pray for us. So this old man, he came and we fed him. He ate and he prayed to his medicine that I would be a good person, and that I would not gossip and that I would be good to all my family. So my first name was Good Luck. But I was sick as a child and so my father seemed to think that the spirits didn’t know that child had been there. So my father, he prayed to his medicine and it was that little bird that flies around the buffalo and warns that buffalo of danger, picks bugs off its coat. And so he named me Waheenee — Buffalo Bird Woman. And it’s been a good name, because I lived to be an old woman."

— Waheenee

Jeanne Eder has transformed herself into Waheenee — Buffalo Bird Woman. You can tell by the long skirt, the fringed shawl, and a belted belt that jingles as she moves. The stories come slowly at first, rolling off her tongue like smoke. Sometimes she whispers, forcing the audience to lean into her words. Her hands sweep through the air to invoke the creatures of her stories, from the great buffalo to the tiny toad. The pitch rises then falls. Her dark eyes suddenly narrow. She stoops like an old grandmother, then rises as the stories come to life.

"We tell our stories when there is snow on the ground so that the spirits of the animals won't be offended [when] we talk about them. Many of our stories have meanings that we see in nature. We believe that nature, Mother Earth, she is a woman who teaches us many things. So when we tell our stories, we believe that the woman is very powerful."

— Waheenee

Eder is one of a handful of Native American women who travel around parts of the country telling the stories of those who have come before. She is Assiniboine with roots on the Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana. In addition to Buffalo Bird Woman, she portrays the Shoshone Indian Sacajewea, who led Lewis and Clark across the northern plains with a baby strapped to her back. Her third character is Red Bird (Zitkala’ sa), a fiery Lakota activist and writer in the 1920s.

Eder began her task when she realized few people were keeping alive the Indian stories that had been handed down through generations. She started her work in earnest in 1979, when her daughter was 9 years old. "I thought it was important for her to have Native American stories," says Eder. "When I started telling them myself, they started becoming more alive."

Those who've never met Eder are surprised to embody Waheenee, a member of the Hidatsa tribe. "I kind of lost touch with what feminism meant anymore," she says. "I think that Native American women moved way beyond feminism, and white feminists, a long time ago."

"If you look at nature, woman is everywhere. Her stories center on numbers. That number four is sacred because of the four directions ... but the number seven is a sacred number, too, because you also have Sky Father and Earth Mother. That's six. But yourself, you are the center of that universe — your own universe — and so seven fours is 28, which is a moon cycle. And my people, the Hidatsa people, planted gardens and would always plant by that moon cycle. And we would always harvest by that moon cycle, and that moon cycle is the same as a woman's cycle. So women have great power."

— Waheenee

To embody Waheenee, Eder spent long hours researching her character, mostly from the field notes of anthropologist Gilbert Wilson, who from 1902 to 1912 lived with and wrote about Waheenee, a member of the Hidatsa tribe. Eder spent time with Waheenee's grandchildren and tested out the role of their grandmother on them before ever facing an audience. At the "premiere," the grandsons reacted with silence, which is one way of showing approval in the Indian world.

"Among my people, when a child is born, that child belongs to the clan of the mother. I belong to the Prairie Chicken Clan. And the woman, she builds the earth lodge ... And so she owns that lodge, and that man, if he is not a good provider, if he does not take care of his wife, she can pack
all of his things, and he better not come back in!  
So the woman is very powerful among my people,  
the Hidatsa."  
— Waheenee

As Sacajawea, Eder is equally strong. Born  
into a tribe of Northern Shoshone in Idaho's  
Lemhi Valley, Sacajawea was kidnapped by a  
party of Hidatsas and taken to the Great Plains.  
Once there, she was bought or won by Toussaint  
Charbonneau, an aging fur trader who later took  
her for his wife. When she was 16 years old, she  
joined the Lewis and Clark expedition, leading  
the explorers across some of the most rugged ter-  
rain on the continent.

Eder had initially decided not to play  
Sacajawea, but with the bicentennial of the expedi-  
tion approaching in 2003, Eder felt she had to  
tell her story and do her justice. She fears the  
Hollywood effect on Native American women, as  
with Pocahontas, who, with long flowing hair and  
curving torso, was portrayed in animation on the  
big screen two years ago. Laughing, Eder asks,  
“What was that Disney crap, anyway?”

Eder’s favorite character is probably  
Zitkala’sa, a strong activist of the Lakota in the  
1920s. Taken by Quaker missionaries to schools  
in the East, Zitkala’sa became a writer and political  
activist, reacting to what she saw happening to her people. Through her writing and activism,  
she pushed for enactment of the Indian  
Citizenship Act, passed in 1924, which for the  
first time confirmed dual U.S. and tribal citizen- 
ship on all American Indians, and with that, the  
right to vote.

Apart from her role as storyteller, Eder is an  
assistant professor and multicultural coordinator  
for Western Montana College in Dillon. She also  
works as a freelance museum consultant, and has  
a keen interest in Native American repatriation  
issues — the return of ancestral bones and arti- 
facts to their tribes.

When summer arrives, Eder resumes the role  
of storyteller, traveling with the Great Plains  
Chautauqua through Oklahoma, Kansas,  
Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. The  
group travels for up to two months, portraying  
different historical characters.

After each show, Eder says she feels compelled  
to defend Native Americans and to speak on their  
behalf. She has been questioned on a wide spec- 
trum of topics — from native history and  
traits, to questions concerning reservation prob- 
lems like alcoholism and gambling. At times, Eder  
has even urged inquisitive members of the audi- 
ence to reread the history books.

Eder says the misconceptions about Native  
Americans are based on “not understand- 
ning political history, not understanding us  
and trying to characterize us with other  
groups in the country. We have dual citizenship.  
We were the original owners of this land (which)  
had to be purchased from us in treaties.”

But it’s the stories that can also bridge the gap  
between the white and Indian worlds, between  
young and old, between the traditional and the  
modern.

“It’s the spirits that preserve the stories,” says  
Eder. “The stories have the power to keep the  
culture alive.”

After shedding her grandmother-like mannerisms with  
her costume, Jeanne Eder emerges as the woman  
behind the storyteller.

Montana’s  
Indians
Angie Gone, an 18-year-old Gros Ventre, came home to Fort Belknap searching for the culture she never knew. She found a culture and its people in a quandary.

Struggling to survive

On the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Northcentral Montana, a culture is in danger of dying and the people can't agree on how to save it.

In a flamingo pink house on the muddy edge of a treeless Indian town, two women are crying. One mourns for her lost girlhood. The other for her lost culture.

With frayed, bitten cuticles and wet, red eyes, Angie Gone pushes her glasses from her face and catches her breath as she tries again to explain the solitude of this isolated prairie and the familiarity of the ancestors she never knew.

Elbows resting on the dark veneer of her dining room table, Angie's aunt Cyndee cups a balled-up hand within the other, keeping her own emotions quiet as she lowers her eyes.

The two women talk softly about their need to make a home, to recapture a culture, to recover a lost spiritual identity. The two came to this table, and this realization, from opposite paths. But now they cling to each other as this family, like some others at Fort Belknap, takes baby steps over new cultural ground.

Angie, 18, has spent most of her life elsewhere, but the motherless girl returned to to rutted streets and tract housing of Hays, on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. She says it's the only home she's ever known.

"I've seen a lot living in the white world and I didn't like what I saw," Angie says. "This is the most peaceful place."

The daughter of two heavy drinkers — an Irish-American mother and Gros Ventre Indian father — Angie spent her first six years in Fort Belknap Agency, a squat town of tribal offices and low-rent housing sandblasted by prairie winds. But her childhood memories of this place are dim. "My aunt says I knew how to dance then, but I don't remember," she says.

On this high plain, home to 5,000 people, a single restaurant and not one clothing store, such faded recollections are at the heart of a new controversy. Five generations after the buffalo days, tribal leaders, elders and youth are struggling to define themselves, posing tough questions amid the disdain of the old and searching cynicism of the young.

Few elders still speak the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine languages. Fewer still have butchered a buffalo. Both skills were once considered sacred and necessary to communicate with the Creator. Such miraculous conversations could still save this reservation, says Tribal Vice Chairman Harlan Mount.

"There are people here who still have a direct link with the Big Guy, the Creator," Mount says. "That's how you will adapt and adjust to the times."

But even Mount isn't putting all of his tribe's eggs in the metaphysical basket. Tapping the computer screen in his bathroom-sized office, the Wrangler-wearing leader predicts that technology will get his people "over the top."

He's hoping to sign some government contracts.
bringing some light manufacturing to the reserva-
tion. "We've got to take responsibility for our own destiny," he says.

But giving people jobs won't return their souls, says Fred Gone, Angie's great-uncle and a coun-
selor at the Fort Belknap Chemical Dependency Center. Gone restructured the center's treatments
to include native spirituality, bringing 12-step pro-
grams within the native Sacred Circle. And while his program seems to touch the reservation's
addicts deeper than the non-Indian approach, drug rehabilitation alone can't carry his people
back in time and it can't tell them who they are.

"We're the only nation in the world that I can
think of that has been defeated holistically," Gone
says. "We welcome a people with a holistic dys-
function.

In its disheveled state, today's culture fails to
provide many on the reservation with the tags of
healthier communities — a spiritual backbone, a
sense of economic hope, the feeling of connected-
ness. More important, Gone argues, Fort Belknap
culture today doesn't reflect the net of respect
that once tied Gros Ventres and Assiniboines to
one another. It's hardly surprising, he says, that
this sense of dysfunction spins out into recogniz-
able forms of community collapse, such as crime
and alcoholism.

Squeezed between dwindling buffalo, shrinking
lands and steeping white culture, Gone's grandfa-
thers quit practicing their spiritual and cultural
ways seven generations ago. The more of them
themselves they relinquished, he says, the less they
taught their children and the shared culture of the
past slowly pulled out its thin momentum like
smoke from the sacred Flat Pipe. Heavy-handed
Catholic boarding schools, still infamous for their
forced migrations of Fort Belknap kids to South
Dakota in cattle trucks, further stomped on the
fragile structure of the once-nomadic Gros Ventres
and Assiniboines.

"That's where drugs and alcohol come into
play," he says.

Fred Gone picks at his white sport socks as he
stares out his window at the unturned sod of his
ancestral home. What you see here nowadays, he
says, is what happens when a defeated people
attempt to fill a cultural void.

"They have a culture here," he says. "But it's a
different culture than what we had. I call it a dys-
functional culture."

He sweeps his arms through the still office air,
driving home the enormity of his people's next
step — reviving their lost ways.

"We need to grow backwards," he says. "We
have to start with the individual person, and then
it goes into the family setting."

"We need to grow backwards," he says. "We
have to start with the individual person, and then
it goes into the family setting."

So one by one, Gone's people mine their own
spirituality from the slippery ore of their ancient
traditions, those of the white world and the habits
adopted at Fort Belknap in the absence of buffalo
and medicine men.

Angie Gone attended her first sweat lodge at 14.
Only a year before her mother fell drunk
through the rotted boards of a railroad truss in
Butte, breaking almost all her bones before crack-
ing her head on an iron rail 20 feet below. She
died at the scene, one month after Angie's 13th
birthday.

Handed from one relative to another, Gone
eventually ran away. She headed for the only place
she could think of — the reservation and her Aunt
Cyndee's.

"I knew she'd be there to take care of me," Gone
says. "She's been open arms and an open
mind."

Emotional wounds still pink from a childhood
in what she dubs "The Outside World," Gone tried
to discard the teachings of her white mother and
the ways of the white world. But the process was
n't easy.

"My mom taught me that if I'm going to be liv-
ing in a white world, I should be raised like a
white person," she says. "I felt like I was white."

Gone moved away from the reservation later
that year, returning to her maternal grandmother's
home in Littleton, Colo. Offering apologies for
running away, Gone struggled to fit in with her
white relatives and patch torn relationships.

But she was never comfortable and didn't stay
long. She re-enrolled as a junior last winter at the
Hays-Lodgepole School, a low-slung brick building
facing a dusty parking lot filled with American-
made cars. The reservation's only high school sits
between two fingers of HUD housing and the
granitic wrinkles of the Little Rocky Mountains.

Light-eyed and wearing a silver nose ring and
dyed black hair, Gone doesn't look like many on
the reservation.

Beyond her own Indian name and the surnames
of a few relatives, she knew little of Native
American culture or her family. Although he lived
just miles his daughter's birthplace, Angie's Native
American father lost contact with his children
for several years.

Now, she's trying to make up for lost time and
her lost past.

Her first foray into the ancient ways of her peo-
ple is through an Indian dance class with SAFE-
FUTURES, an after-school program at a defunct
elementary school in Hays. With slow, rhythmic
steps, Gone's feet tap the school's cement floor as
she mimics the movements of instructors who, like
her, didn't grow up on the reservation but want to
know more about their ancestors.

While she sways to ancient songs, Gone says
she wants to smudge her body in the smoke and
burning sweet grass, purifying herself as her
grandmothers did. And she wants to worship the
Creator her grandmothers called Ih gii ne hoot
in their prayers.

But some elders say she's too late.

"There's too much assimilation. You have
fathers and mothers from two and three dif-
ter tribes," says Madeline Colllflower, a 79-year-
old, full-blood Gros Ventre. "It's almost a losing
game."

To her mind, today's powwow circuit, where
dancers from all over North America compete for
money, bastardizes the dances Colllflower learned
as a girl. Colorful outfits of yarn, felt and ribbon

MONTANA'S INDIANS

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Michele Main is the only student to question Hank Chopwood, as he packs up the medicine bundle he displayed and shared knowledge of with the students of Hays/Lodgepole High School. Michele's interest mirrors that of the larger population at Fort Belknap: only a few show an interest in knowing of the cultural roots of the tribes.

"We've lost too much," she says. "There's no going back."

Ambitious language programs, intended to pump cultural blood into an increasingly assimilated youth, cannot revive the old ways and thus only waste money, she adds. Attempts to practice traditional religion, she says, are the futile, blind scratchings of people who want more than they have.

"It's a mockery, you know," Colliflower says, rocking in the living room of the house her white husband built. "We don't have our medicine men here anymore."

That lapse in cultural development led the tribe to invite dancers from other reservations to pierce themselves at the newly revived Sun Dance. There young men poked whittled sticks through pinches of skin above their nipples, then tethered the sticks and themselves to a center pole while singers repeated the throaty songs of what was once considered the High Mass of most Plains tribes.

I saw a lot living in the white world and I didn't like what I saw.

Angie Gone

Belknap children the ways of their people, aren't of Fort Belknap's tribes.

So the old ways are in the ground with the dead, Colliflower says. And there's no reviving them.

"They should just let it die with dignity."

But it's not that easy, others say. Dances and costumes may be mere decorations, but the search for what it means to be Indian is impossible to ignore.

Being Indian is in the heart, says Hank Chopwood, a 57-year-old artist and keeper of a medicine bundle he admits he doesn't understand. It's not in your clothes or language.

"You've got to walk it, sleep it, live it," he says. "It isn't just braids. It isn't just going into a sweat or saying 'I'm a Native American.' You know it in your soul."

Television, junk food and rock music hang like badges of modern white America on today's young Native people, Chopwood says. But even these pop culture stains can't completely cover Native American youth. They may be alienated and searching, but they're still Indians. "It's like a tattoo that never wears off," he says.

Growing to understand his Indian spiritual inheritance didn't happen overnight, he says. And it's not a low-impact decision. Being an Indian demands minute-by-minute attention to the spiritual side of life.

Angie Gone's cultural search teaches her the grace, beauty and dignity of traditional dancing. She is learning the art of making her own dancing outfit in preparation for her first dance. SAFEFUTURES teaches the students how to dance and the cultural etiquette of dancing and powwows.
"It takes living it to really learn it," he says.
He nods to his 81-year-old, toothless uncle
Wallace, who sits next to his nephew in a back
office of the Lodgepole Senior Center, alternately
listening and turning down his hearing aid.
"He knows what it's about," he states.
Many old ways expelled their last breaths gen­
erations ago. But the purest blood in the Indian
heart isn't dead.
"There will always be Indians," Chopwood
says.

Black hair pulled away from her round face,
Cynde Gone eats jelly-filled cookies in the gov­
ernment-owned house where two generations of
her family were born, raised and later died.
Brought up Catholic, Gone left the church years
ago. From her heart, she prays to the Creator, but
no one taught her Gros Ventre prayers and she
doesn't speak her native language. She is forging
her own religion, part native and part personal.
Still she wants to know more of her people's tra­
ditional spirituality.
"I'm a baby in this way," she says. "To listen to
someone pray in Gros Ventre just makes me cry.
It's so beautiful."
Gone doesn't know how her oldest son, Tony,
learned native prayers. But she instilled in each
of four children a respect for themselves, their
elders and the subtle spirituality of their grandfa­
thers.
They have to pray from here," she says, tap­
ing her heart, 'not from here,' pointing to her
head.
Like Hank Chopwood, Gone knows that the
spiritual life of an Indian can't be shrugged away
or confined to periodic Sun Dances.
"If you want to learn this, you have to believe
it," she says. "It's everything. God is all over. You
have to believe it in this simple way."
Gone gave each of her children an Indian
name. She taught them to smudge with sweet­
grass. And when Angie arrived on her cement
door step, Cyndee showed her niece the same
ways.
"This way will help her heal," she says.

A young dancer walks away from the
SAFEFUTURES program at the
John Capture Center in Hays,
carrying with him his cultural future
and that of the Assiniboine and
Gros Ventre tribes.
Without our traditions, the old ones warn, we are in danger of...
“I’ve been telling them that even though they’ve grown up here they’ll have trouble getting jobs here just because they’re not enrolled” at Fort Peck, she says. “They’ll have trouble getting hunting and fishing rights here because they’re not enrolled. They’ll see a difference.”

Winona is going to school at Fort Peck Community College this year and is vice president of the student senate. She also helps out as varsity cheerleader adviser at the high school in Fraser.

Each spring Winona and Walter wait for the school year to end so they can again dance at the powwows. But they acknowledge some powwows have lost some of the old traditions.

“Back then if part of your (powwow outfit) fell off while you were dancing, then you were supposed to walk off,” Winona says. “Nowadays if something falls off people just continue to dance. That to me is wrong.”

With the winds still gusting outside of Poplar, Albert Foote and Curley Youpee have left their Pepsi’s and the warmth of the Morsette’s cozy living room and stepped into the chill of the Youpee, a 46-year-old Sioux, begin to build a fire.

Standing over a pile of wood, illuminated in the stark yellow glow from the headlights of Youpee’s truck, Foote and Youpee hardly notice their jackets as the mercury dips below 10 degrees.

“Back then if part of your (powwow outfit) fell off while you were dancing, then you were supposed to walk off,” Winona says. “Nowadays if something falls off people just continue to dance. That to me is wrong.”

Tedious and exact, the process will take the better part of the next two hours. There will be a foundation of four stones, one for each of the four cardinal directions. Then two more, one representing the Creator, the other, Mother Earth. Finally, a seventh, signifying one’s inner spirit.

Before they are finished, the fire will bake 42 stones in all, part of a sacred ceremony that will purify the mind and body and help them offer prayer. In a few hours these stones will be carried into the sweat lodge, where they will be doused with water and sage, creating a heat so extreme that even Foote and Youpee will be driven to the edges of the lodge to escape its intensity.

“Once an abuser of drugs and alcohol, Albert Foote credits his traditional native spirituality — what he likes to call the ‘red road’ — with his recovery from a destructive lifestyle. As a counselor at Poplar’s Spotted Bull Treatment Center, Foote now helps teens overcome the same types of addiction he used to suffer.”

Donald huddles in a corner of the sweat lodge, waiting for the stones to heat, searching for a purifying way.

Another hour passes as Foote and Youpee stand beside the fire, watching the smoke disappear into the darkness. Finally a new set of headights emerges from an approaching car. In it sits 13-year-old Donald Buck Elk and his mother and father. This will be Donald’s first sweat in more than a year.

“Young people like Donald come up against a lot,” Foote says. “I hope to see people like Donald be able to maintain a spiritual understanding and understand who they are and be proud of that. If you believe in those things you will be able to go on, you will be able to maintain your Indianness.”

Her hair long and black, her skin unblemished and tan, Kacie Thompson fidgets as she sits at the end of the kitchen table in her classy split-level home west of Poplar, too nervous, maybe too uncomfortable, to talk about the whispers.

Though she’s slow to admit it, Kacie has heard these whispers on the playground and in the halls. Not so much anymore, but when she was younger, and they hurt.

They were whispers of apple and white-wannabe, and they were whispers from Indians and non-Indians alike.

“Jealousy is a big issue here,” says Kacie’s mother, Mary, a non-Indian who has spent much of her life on the Fort Peck Reservation.

“Indians can’t stand to see other Indians get ahead. They pick on them to bring them down.”

With a white mother and a Sioux father, culture comes in a mixed bag for Kacie, a quiet, slender 15-year-old, and for her younger brother and sister, Kyle and Kalli.

Their father, Kim, grew up a Lakota Sioux in Lower Brule, S.D.; their mother a “naive” ranch girl from a “roisy setting” north of Brockton.

Both parents have spent their lives in a Native American backdrop, but it’s a life both say they have a difficult time passing on to their children.

“My dad was just an old-time cowboy, and I don’t think a lot of those things made all that
During her first period class at Wolf Point High School, Winona Runsabove raises her hand in response to a teacher's query.

much difference to him," says Thompson, a soft-spoken man with a warm handshake who was left motherless at age 6.

“I spent most of my childhood being raised by my brothers and sisters and going to public schools off the reservation. Much of what I know about my own culture comes from what I’ve read.

Frustrated by a school system offering their children a scant menu of courses on Native American culture, and frustrated by a community where they sometimes feel they don’t fit in, the Thompsons are looking for ways to ease those concerns.

Mary Thompson has felt cold stares when she takes her children shopping, once followed throughout a shoe store a few miles off the reservation by a white clerk obviously convinced, she says, that they were going to steal something. But these are stares, she realizes, that come from both directions.

“There’s a reason why we ended up back in Poplar and that’s to start building bridges between the two races,” she says. “I just don’t know how we’re going to do that yet.”

A freshman in high school, Kacie has watched the powwows and has begun to ask questions about her culture, but unlike Winona, many of Kacie’s questions have gone unanswered.

Kacie doesn’t have Native American grandparents who can sit with her at night and tell her the stories of her ancestry, or a mother skilled at sewing tobacco lids on jingle dresses. She has never danced in a powwow, and she has never taken part in the sacred sweat lodge ceremony.

But what Kacie does have are two parents who will do whatever they can to find the best possible opportunities for their children.

“I can’t teach them those things, but I want them to get all they can,” Mary Thompson says, her eyes focused on her daughter. “I don’t want them to see Indian people and the negative things about Indian people and be ashamed about it.

“In some ways I wish I had a colorful history like Indian people do. It impresses me so much. If I came from a tribe I would want to know everything, so I think they should want to know everything.”

In three years Kacie will be staring at a high school diploma, and an uncertain future.

“I guess I want my kids to get a good education, and I want them to have an opportunity in the world,” Kim Thompson says. “I’m not going to limit them to something on the reservation. I just don’t see much of a future for them here.”

Midnight has come and gone as eight glistening bodies emerge from the Morsettes’ sweat lodge, flinching as they again come in contact with the bitter early-morning air. One by one they make their way back to their cars and to their clothes, exhausted from a night of blazing heat, relentless cold and constant prayer.

Tonight they sang the native songs and shared the sacred pipe, prayed for their loved ones and purified their bodies and their minds.

Tonight they will all sleep soundly.

Seated at a shiny red booth at the Wolf Point Tastee Freez two days later, Foote and Youpee laugh loudly as they poke fun at their tolerant waitress. Youpee teases her and asks for a Big Mac, knowing full well that they are served only at the McDonald’s just across the street. Finally their orders arrive and the atmosphere turns slightly somber. Their smiles disappear as the discussion turns from fast food to Fort Peck’s young people and what the future holds for those like Donald, Kacie and Winona.

“I believe there’s hope, a continued hope for our people,” says Foote, a father of three. “If you don’t have that hope and faith there, you start to lose your own identity and culture.

“That red road will always be there for us as long as we can maintain and learn from our elders.”

But at the threshold of adulthood, Winona is a bit more skeptical.

“My great-grandmother told me that the seventh generation was going to bring us back to our culture, and that’s my age group, that’s us,” Winona says. “But most of them aren’t even talking to their parents or asking the questions.

“Sometimes, that’s pretty scary.”

Montana’s Indians
The power of an arrow

Slipping strong coffee in the warmth of his kitchen, Jack Old Horn looks tired. His large brown eyes are rimmed with red, his voice is hoarse from singing until the early morning hours. Yesterday morning, he took part in a blessing ceremony. He spent last night singing and drumming at the victory dance to celebrate Hardin High School’s boys’ basketball state title.

Today, as he eases his long thin body into a kitchen chair, there is still no sleep in sight. He will sweat and pray with his brothers in the sweat lodge this afternoon, go to his clan family dinner, then prepare to return to work at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Crow Agency. When the rains taper off in early May, Jack and his family will add one more activity to their already full schedule — arrow throwing.

The Apsaaloke, known to the western world as the Crow Nation of Montana, believe that the Four Sacred Arrows were given to a young boy who had been taken by the Little People. When he was returned to his people, he brought four arrows to them. Each was a different color and each had special meaning. The white arrow relates to sustenance; the yellow to defense against evil beings that are stronger than man; the blue is for victory in battle and the last arrow is red, its power so strong as to annihilate the enemy. These original arrows are now in the Smithsonian Institution. According to the oral history of the tribe, the red arrow was the only one never used.

The Apsaaloke still affirm the sacred powers of the original arrows. Today, versions of those arrows as well as other designs are used in a competitive, men’s-only game called simply “arrow throwing” or, in the Crow language, Aaluudiek, meaning “sending an arrow.”

Barney Old Coyote arrow thrower

"The greatest gift Maker ever gave to the people was the ability to make wishes.”

Jack Old Horn takes care to replicate the exact designs of the original Four Sacred Arrows when he crafts arrows for throwing competitions.

Written by ELLENA BEARDON'T WALK
Photographed by JORDAN LARUE

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to tease and faster with a smile as he speaks of his children and different aspects of life on the Crow Reservation, where he was born and raised. He, his wife and their three children live on the same land in southeastern Montana where he practiced throwing arrows as a boy. When he talks about arrow throwing, his tone is serious and respectful.

"Arrow throwing still has a quasi-religious element to it," he says, referring to the tribe's belief in the arrows' inherent powers. "The arrows used in competition are designs handed down. They are not random. Each arrow set has a prescription to it that must be followed to maintain the power," Old Horn explains.

These "prescriptions," as he calls them, are varied and distinct and must be followed to the letter. The instructions are so specific they may call for only the wingtip feathers of a certain bird. Paints must be made, not bought, and the work put into each set of arrows is usually done by the person who has by tradition been given the prescription.

Old Horn's arrows are carved from chokecherry branches. He removes the bark, then soaks the branches and dries them before placing them in vices to assure they are straight and true. When he first began making arrows, Old Horn says, he used to measure the width to be carved by placing a wire-strung dime onto the very end of the raw branch to get an idea of how much to take off. He no longer needs that dime and his skill at making arrows is well known. During cultural weeks at area schools, Old Horn demonstrates parts of arrow making and tells of his experiences as an arrow thrower.

Arrow throwing was once a winter sport played while the people were encamped for a long period of time. Now it is played in the late spring and early summer, to allow people to travel and compete before the Plains powwow season begins.

The game itself involves fewer strict, unchanging rules than does arrow making. The competition is comparable to javelin throwing, but the rules and objectives are different. Each team tries to score a set number of points before the others can. Team members try to land their arrows closest to the target arrow, which is usually 45 to 50 yards away from the throwing lines. Only the thrower getting closest to the target arrow will win the point for that throw. Two divisions exist for players, a junior category for boys 13-18, and a senior division for men 18 and older.

Old Horn began throwing as a boy, wanting to be like his older brothers, who were also arrow throwers. They and the neighbor boys would practice in nearby fields and they soon noticed Old Horn's talent for the game.

"By the time I was 13, I was heavy into competition," Old Horn said. Since that time, he has continued the intensity of competition except for about 10 years in the 1980s when he took a break.

In Old Horn's small three-bedroom home, there is no need to ask of his accomplishments as an arrow thrower, an athletic coach, horse trainer or even as a father. Photos comprise a unique wallpaper in his living room: horses with ribbons, children in athletic uniforms, proms and graduations, photos of Crow elders dressed in buckskin and elk tooth dresses. He points to a photo hanging next to the door, a shot of about 20 men standing in front of a tipi.

"That was the end of a tournament. We were able to get some of the throwers who hadn't left yet to come over and pose for the picture," Old Horn reminisces. "I was very fortunate to be in competition with those men because they are all strong throwers."

What he doesn't mention is that on the same day he was also high-point man, scoring the most points in the tournament, helping his
Blacklodge District team take home another title.

Teams for the tournaments can be made up several ways, depending on who hosts the tournament. Some are set by reservation district, some are competitions between clans. The Crow Nation is one of the few tribes that still maintains a clan system. Membership in the seven clans passes down from the mother to her children. Old Horn belongs to the Whistling Water clan. There are also seven districts on the reservation that divide people by area. Old Horn lives in Dunmore, in the Blacklodge District. Districts may challenge other districts and clans may challenge other clans.

“People don’t make wishes for you for things you don’t want. They say, ‘I wish for so-and-so to be a great arrow thrower, if he wants to … if he wants to attain this, I give good wishes for him to do so’ … You want to do the best, try to fulfill that. When you do that, your family is behind you. You aren’t only representing your family. You represent their wishes for you.”

Barney Old Coyote
arrow thrower

Old Coyote started throwing arrows as a young boy. “Just like any kid, I wanted to have grown up arrows,” he says. “I got one when I was about 6. It didn’t have a tip so we couldn’t get hurt.”

Old Coyote says he had only one arrow so he and his friends would take turns throwing it again and again. He began to compete but his competitive years were cut short by World War II, when he became one of the first Crows to enlist. He and his brother Hank flew on bombers, serving 50 missions together. Both were highly decorated.

“Mr. Mother used to say that if we were in old times, Barney would be a chief,” Old Horn says. After the war Old Horn earned a college degree and became the first Indian to be assistant to the Secretary of Interior. He continues a life immersed in politics and academia. His accomplishments and encouragement are a driving force for Old Horn to perpetuate his culture. Old Horn attributes his success and good fortune to his family’s cultural ties.

“I’m one of the fortunate persons to have been born into a good family,” he explains. “Because of Barney’s many good deeds, I am fortunate to know him. I came from people who chose not preserve our culture but to perpetuate it. When making decisions for myself, for my family, I always seek advisers, people who may see things I don’t.”

At 17, Jonathan Old Horn follows closely in his father’s footsteps as an arrow thrower. “I didn’t go to Jonathan and say I want you to

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be as good as your father," Old Coyote says. "I want him to be good at what he chooses to do."

Jonathan, a junior at St. Labre Mission School in Ashland, started throwing at 7, had his first set of arrows at 9 and has been competing for almost five years. When not arrow throwing, he plays basketball, runs cross country, drums, sings and competes as a grass dancer at pow­wows. His build and demeanor resemble his father's and, also like his father, he is reluctant to speak of his accomplishments.

He listens carefully as his father speaks. They exchange words in Crow when trying to recall details of arrow throwing stories or scores. He is respectful of his fathers and his culture. As his father begins to tell of Jonathan's accomplishments, the teenager sinks into the couch and turns his eyes to the TV.

"I think we're fortunate that Jonathan has been blessed with these qualities," Old Horn says, looking proudly at his son. "Some people are participants, others have aspirations like him. He has friends wherever he goes, he respects his family and culture."

There is a time in the tournament when a player is allowed to speak of his deeds. When each team earns half the points needed to win, a man from that team is called on to speak of his deeds. Only one is chosen. Old Horn and Old Coyote have many times been that man chosen. Old Coyote speaks often of "wishes" made for and by him for other people. These wishes give the people the encouragement to be the best.

"People don't make wishes for you for things you don't want," he explains. "They say, 'I wish for so-and-so to be a great arrow thrower, if he wants to ... If he wants to attain this, I give good wishes for him to do so.'"

Old Coyote says that when people make wishes for you, "you want to do the best, try to fulfill that. When you do that, your family is behind you. You aren't only representing your family. You represent their wishes for you."

Old Coyote and the Old Horns believe their accomplishments as arrow throwers came because they respect the wishes of their elders.

"The greatest gift Maker ever gave to the people was the ability to make wishes," Old Coyote says.
Taking cautious steps, members of a cultural leadership class scan the earth for new plants.

They keep their eyes on the ground, trying not to step on cow pies and little green clumps of bitterroot that have not yet bloomed. Stopping at the crest of a hill, they turn to face the golden slopes of Camas Prairie. Cattle stroll across the rocky ground to a waterhole 20 yards away.

Myrna DuMontier brushes her black bangs from her eyes and zips her hooded sweatshirt. She bends over to pick one of the bright green plants with the lanky leaves. She examines its roots. They're not ready yet, she decides, as she delicately lays it back on the earth.

These members of the Salish cultural leadership class will return to the western edge of the Flathead Indian Reservation when the bitterroot caretaker says it's time. Just before the flower blooms, and the roots are soft and easy to peel, they'll return with "petzas," digging tools traditionally made from animal bones, and harvest the plants for the annual feast.

But first they'll pray. They'll thank God for creating the bitterroot, the most important plant to the Salish Indians, and Montana's state flower. And they'll thank the bitterroot for coming.

"We talk to the bitterroot as a living person," says Johnny Arlee, 56-year-old teacher of the class. "The leader will talk to it as a human, welcome it, ask for it to come back next year. Thank it for all the other berries that have come to help celebrate."

Deep inside the bitterroot is a small red speck, its heart. They say if you dig the plant before the caretaker's blessing, your garden will freeze. If you wait, you'll have a plentiful crop for years to come.

Although many Indians today aren't such sticklers about the traditional blessing of bitterroot, Arlee and his students make sure to welcome the plants.

"Don't step on our visitors," Arlee cautions.

Arlee teaches a cultural leadership class to Salish-Kootenai College students in the hope that someday they will become the cultural leaders the Flathead Reservation, a place where 60 percent of the inhabitants are white. The year-long class aims at teaching language, as well as native traditions.

Arlee kneels on the ground to examine a plant with thicker leaves than the others. Tucking his silver-streaked black braids into his windbreaker, he whispers to the bitterroot, petting its bright green stalks...

"This used to be a dream of mine, to go out and greet all the new gifts," he says. "It's through this class that I can. All these foods and plants are free gifts from the spirits. That's how I feel about it."

As long as he lives, Arlee says, he will return to the prairie each year in search of bitterroot. He will welcome the plants, the berries and the birds. And when he is gone, his students will come. He dreams they will be speaking Salish, that they will know the words to greet the new visitors.

"A long time ago, the chiefs had the say," he says. "When there was a death, they said who would be the grave diggers, who was to stay by them and pray. There were people to appoint these things. We're just kind of feeling our way around today. We don't have any real leaders now, just teachers."

Arlee, who is considered a medicine man...
by many members of his tribe, is one of the few of his generation devoting his life to passing on the culture of the Salish Indians. He says he doesn't want the lives of his children and grandchildren to be as empty as his once was. Although he grew up speaking Salish with his grandfather, Arlee says he turned away from his native tongue and cultural heritage in his youth. He says he was part of the generation that didn't want to be Indian.

He left Montana in 1958 to join the U.S. Army. He cut his hair, started drinking and never spoke a word of Salish. Those were years of "craziness," he says. He credits three 13-year-old girls for turning his life around almost 20 years ago. And since then, he has promised not to let them down. He wants his students to be proud of their heritage, not slip through the cracks as he did.

"I used to be a terrible person, a stereotypical, awful, drunken Indian," he says. "It was the kids that turned me around. I let my hair grow and I quit drinking."

Arlee says he will never forget the day when Myrna Dumontier, now a student-in-her-home teacher, came to his classroom. He was involved in a cultural leadership course Arlee hopes will continue long after he's gone. He owes the meaning of his life, he says, to Dumontier and her friends.

Dumontier was raised in Arlee by her great-grandmother, who spoke little English. She taught her to dance and sing, to ride horses and to speak Salish. But it wasn't enough.

"When I got off the bus to go to school, I became a white person," she says. "When I got home again, I was Indian. There was nothing in school to support Indian children."

Dumontier knew her great-grandmother wouldn't be around forever, nor would any of the elders. The day she understood her culture was dying she was at the annual Fourth of July Powwow.

"I stood back one time just watching them dance," she says. "I realized some who had been there before were gone. I thought, who is going to do this after they're gone? What's going to come of us as a people?"

Dumontier wanted to find a way to bring culture back to the schools, and keep it there. With Arlee's help, she did.

The young women organized a drum group and practiced in an abandoned Ole's gas station. On brisk fall evenings, they met in the cement building and made a fire in the fireplace. During the first few weeks, the orange glow of the flames and their singing voices attracted curious police officers. Eventually, the citizens of the small town of Arlee expected them to be there.

Throughout the summer, they traveled across Montana to participate in powwows. In the beginning, tribal elders were so shocked to see a drum group with no men, they wouldn't dance. People just stared, Dumontier says. Traditionally, only men were allowed to drum and the women stood behind them.

But eventually the elders came around. She says they realized the young women were doing their best to return culture to their generation, even if it wasn't exactly as it was before. Soon the tribal leaders began attending classes with the students in Arlee's garage. They told stories, helped tend hides and make drums. The meetings evolved into Arlee High School's Indian Club, the first student group to support Indian culture in Arlee.

"I really credit those girls for bringing the culture back," Arlee says. "No one was asking the elders for help or advice. Their own children didn't care."

Dumontier wants to follow in Arlee's footsteps. And through his leadership course, she's well on her way.

Arlee's students spent the fall visiting the old Salish hunting grounds, campsites on the reservation and studying the uses of animal parts. Throughout the winter, they studied spiritual ceremonies, ceremonies so personal to the tribe that Arlee teaches his students.

"We depended on prayer all the time to remember what's important, that we're still alive and learning every day."

Johnny Arlee teacher
students, who are all tribal members, not to discuss them with non-tribal members. Nor will Arlee talk about the tribe's sacred sites. When non-Salish people know about them, he says, they are no longer sacred. Last summer, the class traveled across the reservation, and as far as Dillon, Seeley Lake, Idaho and Washington, to visit the sacred sites of the Salish, learning the words to describe them as they went.

Arlee hopes his fledgling class will prove the best approach to teaching Salish language. Salish-Kootenai College has offered language courses for more than a decade and it has yet to turn out one fluent speaker, he says. Unless people grow up speaking Salish, a language that didn’t exist in written form until a few years ago, it takes years of dedication to be fluent.

"It’s so difficult for older people to learn the language," Arlee says. "Little kids can be fluent in three months' time. Those little kids are the ones that just made me cry."

The students in Arlee's class come from different backgrounds and span many ages, but one thing is the same. They all want to be the next generation of leaders. They want to share all they have learned from their elders with their children. If they don’t, they fear, no one will. They’re driven by that fear, an empty feeling telling them their culture is slowly dying.

Greg Dumontier, Myrna’s husband, said he has never felt whole, until now. He says that when Indian students hit high school, they begin to feel lost, just as he did. It’s at this crucial point in their lives that they need leaders to guide them. But the leaders are fading. Elders are dying, and not many are stepping up to take their place.

Greg Dumontier is one of the few making that commitment. He left his 15-year career in tribal government to go back to school and become a cultural leader. He felt he was living a lie, he says. He was disheartened with his colleagues and with the man he was becoming.

Government leaders spend too much time talking about how to preserve Indian culture and never take action, he says. One day he decided to leave his job as head of the tribal health department, determined to dedicate as many years as it would take to be fluent in his native tongue. He compares his commitment to earning a college degree. You have to make the same sacrifices, he says.

Charlie Quequesah, one of four students in the class under age 25, enrolled for similar reasons. He's worried about his culture, especially the language. He remembers the stories his father told him about going to school and being forced to cut his hair and speak English. He says white people have stripped away the Salish culture, but he’s not giving up. He wants to become a Salish linguist and spend his life teaching others.

"We don’t have too many speakers left," he says. "I think it’s up to the young people to pass it on because we can’t ever lose it."

Quequesah was the elementary student priming his elders for information instead of playing with the others. He has a bond with them, he says, and it shows in his interactions with the elders who come to the cultural class.

Tribal elder Felicite McDonald pats her white curly hair as she searches for the right word. Bouncing back and forth between Salish and English, she converses with Arlee for nearly 10 minutes during a class at the Dumontier home. The students watch curiously, repeating her words in whispers, trying to guess what she’s saying. From the broken bits of interspersed English, they have an idea, but when Arlee stops and asks Quequesah what she said, he can’t answer. McDonald mouths the answer in Salish to Quequesah, her favorite pupil, from across the table. He says it correctly, but his classmates laugh. They saw her give him the answer.

Arlee gets their attention, pointing to the ink drawings of the deer, elk, rabbit and beaver on the wall. The Salish names of the animals are printed in neat block lettering below their pictures: puwe’ (deer), nc’ican
used to be a terrible person, a stereotypical, awful, drunken Indian. It was the kids that turned me around. I let my hair grow and I quit drinking.

Johnny Arlee teacher

I

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Johnny Arlee teacher

(wolf), sqlew (beaver). It’s easier to remember the words if you can visualize them. Arlee says.

The group enjoys the days they spend inside being quizzed by Arlee, but more than anything, they love the outings, especially McDonald. She can still spot a lone yellow bell in an open field 10 feet from the road.

"Qawx," says student Tachini Pete. They stand around the petite yellow flower, each taking a turn at its pronunciation. Arlee and McDonald repeat its name, encouraging the students to make the deep sound in the back of their throats.

"I don’t think you guys have been practicing," Arlee teases. "That’s what you should have been doing over your spring break."

They pile back into the college’s Suburban and head farther up the mountain on the muddy road. They’re in the middle of nowhere, nearly two hours from Pablo. It’s one of the only places where they can still pick bitterroot, a plant that, despite its bitter taste, is becoming harder and harder. Camas Prairie is now one of the only places Arlee knows he can find them.

McDonald says Indians once roamed all over the rolling fields of the prairie, a place now marred with crumbling gray homestead cabins, an occasional ranch house and fields of cattle. It’s nearly all private property, which makes it difficult to harvest bitterroot.

Fortunately, Arlee knows Sid Cross, owner of several acres on the western edge of the Flathead Reservation. His land is abundant with the plant.

"All I ask is that you close the gate so the cows don’t get out," says Cross, whose ancestors homesteaded this farm at the turn of the century.

But Arlee knows Cross won’t be around forever to let Indians on his land. In fact, it was only a few years ago that he didn’t allow anyone on his property. He said they picked too much, and ever since he’s opened up only a small portion of his land to visitors. After some harvesters made what he calls “derogatory remarks” to the Missoulian newspaper, he’s threatened not to let them come back if it happens again.

"We’ve always got along, but there’s always people who make remarks that aren’t acceptable to a white man or an Indian," Cross says. "We have just as much right to be here as they do, and they have just as much right to be here as we do.

Arlee has asked the tribal government several times to purchase land in Camas Prairie, but he says nothing has happened.

"I’ve been telling the tribal council, we need to get that land," he says. "They just forget about it. That’s the way it happens with a lot of our culture things. It gets put on the back burner until it’s lost.

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He thinks the land will be available for at least another generation, and after that, all they can do is hope. Without access to bitterroot, camas, wild vegetables and flowers, Flathead ceremonies will lose their meaning. And some, like the annual bitterroot feast, would vanish entirely.

When he is gone, he trusts the next generation of leaders, his students, will continue to perpetuate their culture by seeking native plants. Just like in his dream, they will return to Camas Prairie to pray to the bitterroot, and they will pray in Salish.

“We depended on prayer all the time to remember what’s important, that we’re still alive and learning every day,” Arlee says. "That’s what we teach in our class, that we still must pray to remember. We still must respect this life and learn to pass it on."
Keeper of the culture

Herbarium curator Joanne Bigcrane finds, nurtures and protects the native plants of the Salish and Kootenai Indians

Written by JENNIFER BROWN  Photographed by LEM PRICE

In a crowded room full of herb sellers, Joanne Bigcrane stands out like a yellow bell among weeds. Wearing her beaded dream catcher earrings and blue jeans, her attire is unlike the plant harvesters' long, flowered skirts and Birkenstocks. A panelist at the Great Northern Botanicals Association's annual meeting, Bigcrane listens patiently to the alternative business people sharing marketing tips and favorite harvesting sites. They've set up displays in the hallways of the Vocational Agriculture Building in Kalispell, showing off products that range from naturopathic medicines like echinacea to herbal pet cleansers. They're here to discover the best places to find medicinal plants and how to harvest them responsibly.
Bigcrane fights to secure the future of Salish-Kootenai cultural plants.

She seeks them, nurtures them and shields them from an outside world eager to exploit them.

When she spots it each spring, she is reminded of a Salish story she heard from her grandmother.

One spring long ago famine hit the tribe. Camas roots and berries were scarce, and animals moved elsewhere.

A generous old woman shared what little food she had with the children and the men who hunted. But she knew that without more food, the tribe would never make it through the winter. She walked alone to the edge of the Little Bitterroot River near Hot Springs, and knelt on the bank to pray to the Creator. Her black hair brushed the ground as she began to cry.

A single tear dripped from her face and splashed onto the earth. A bitterroot plant grew before her eyes in the moist dirt.

Circling above, a bird told the old woman to boil the roots of the new plant and feed them to her tribe. More would grow nearby, enough to last the Salish people through the winter. They would never starve again, the bird said.

"That story gives me the core foundation of why my people are who we are," Bigcrane says.

But today, native plants like the bitterroot are in danger. The biggest threats are the millions of wildcrafters trying to stuff them in jars and sell them as medicine.

Bigcrane has seen acres of bear grass chopped off below the flower by trespassers just looking to make a quick buck. She's seen fields of lady slippers trampled by hikers, and miles of blue camas ripped from the earth, roots and all.

"We're beginning to believe we're not the savages," she says. "We have terrible trespassing problems. We call them the rapers and the pillagers."

She despises "Medicine Man," a movie about a doctor cruising Brazilian rain forests in search of a cure. In fact, she hates the whole medicine industry. It disgusts her to see the fancy researchers sending field biologists to tribes for answers. They drop in, gather the bare necessity of facts, and leave forever without one word of gratitude or a bit of understanding.

"Some are looking for money, some are looking for fame," she says. "In the last few years everyone wants to become a medicine man. There's more to it than knowing a plant. Tribes have a whole structure that goes with it, certain prayers, songs, rituals."

Researchers often steal whatever information they can gather from the tribes, and never give them the credit nor the benefits of the new medicines, she says. It makes her leery of giving out information. Part of her job as the plant protector is keeping ceremonies related to the plants a secret.

"A lot of tribes are getting very protective of their plant research," she says. "They were the ones that spent years developing and learning, and then some premium company just comes in and takes it over. And it never benefits the people they took it from."

She could tell you where to find any cultural plant, but that doesn't mean she will. Only when she knows the caller is a tribal member and the plants will be used for a ceremony or a native food will she tell her secrets.

Bigcrane keeps a dried specimen of each plant in a herbarium cabinet just outside her office door. As long as they don't get wet, or bugs don't get inside the cabinet, the samples stuck to the acid-free paper with acid-free glue will last hundreds of years. Unfortunately, hundreds of years from now, the specimens in Bigcrane's cabinet could be the only proof some of those plants existed.

"I'm worried about them," she says. "Without them, part of me, part of my people would be missing."
A lone tree stands amid the softly contoured, windswept plains just north of the highway that runs along the edge of Fort Peck.

I guess I want my kids to get a good education and I want them to have opportunity in the world. I'm not going to limit them to something on the reservation. I just don't see much of a future for them here.

Mary Thompson,
mother of two mixed-heritage children