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

A Special Report by the School of Journalism

The University of Montana
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As the icy April wind blew across the plains of the Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern 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 Jeanne Eder, a perpetuator 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.

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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.

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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.
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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

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, tan-yellow-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, rooting 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 nay tsa pi po yit ano iitais ksi ni matlo toh kio' p," or "Please do not speak English in the school," each child's Indian name labels one of the blond wooden lockers where they hang their coats each morning.

The school's credo is simple. Show a positive image of being Blackfeet and instill the children with a sense of self, heritage and pride in their ancestors.

"We're not tanning hides or living in tipis," founder Darrell Kipp says of the school's impact. "What really happens is the language strengthens their self-awareness and their self-concepts in their formative years. We present a very positive picture of being an Indian here."

Indeed, the children of Moccasin Flat School have a confidence that eludes many of the students of the Browning public schools, where 65 percent of high-schoolers never complete the 10th grade.

Even the tiniest member of the class, a 3-year-old in a pink Mickey Mouse sweatshirt and matching pink bows in her long dark hair, boldly approaches a visitor.

"What's your name?" she asks.

The stranger replies.

"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, a quality many of their parents say is lacking in the public schools of Browning.

In the sunny newness of Moccasin Flat, not only students, but parents, teachers and administrators are rekindling the dignity that was extinguished years ago when the first Blackfeet children were carted away to boarding schools and punished for speaking the language of their tribe.

The children and grandchildren of the boarding school generation may never have felt the sting of a missionary's ruler, but the invisible scars are still evident.

Today, the parents of the Moccasin Flat schoolchildren remember the painful legacy of their grandparents. Many of them know only a few words of Blackfeet, and they feel the regret of losing that tie with their heritage.

At a parents' meeting one April morning, several Moccasin Flat mothers sit around an oval oak table in the kitchen of the one-room schoolhouse.

Helen Horn wants her son Keith to grow up without knowing the frustration she feels when she tries to converse with tribal elders in her halting Blackfeet. With only her income as an administrative assistant at the Blackfeet Community College to support a family of seven, sending 5-year-old Keith to private school is a challenge, but a sacrifice she is willing to make for the future of the reservation.

"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."

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 Laureena 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."

When she went away to college, she worried so much about being as good as her white peers that her hair fell out in clumps and a bald spot appeared on the top of her head.
Isspitaaki LaFromboise demonstrates to her class how she can count up to 20 in Blackfeet.

Some time down the road these kids are going to be leaders in the community. 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.

Helen Horn mother

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.

Darrell Kipp founded the Piegan Institute in 1985 with the goal of removing the stigma of shame instilled by boarding schools. The Moccasin Flat Language Schools are a testament to this effort.

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Darrell Kipp, founder of the Moccasin Flats School, is now in opening a new school for older children called the Cuts Wood School.

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. “Looking at 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.

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.”

Montana’s Indians
The many faces of the storyteller

Written by NINA KJONIGSEN Photographed by KATHERINE HEAD

"I tell the stories: kind of like my grandmothers told me," says Jeane Eder.

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 the spirits, 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, 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 Sacajawea, 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 when the storytelling ends and Waheenee leaves the room and a seemingly much younger woman returns to the stage. Out of character, her black hair hanging loose below her shoulders, and dressed in a black dress, she asks questions and explains why she chooses the woman she portrays.

The Indian woman has been largely ignored in history and literature, she says. Yet, in Native American culture, the women were strong and highly respected. Unlike in the white world, Eder says, these women are not thought of as activists or feminists. "I kind of lost touch with what feminism meant anymore," she says. "I think that Indian women were probably the original feminists, and I certainly don't see that as male bashing, but I guess working with men on the same level. I guess 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. Fearful of not portraying Waheenee accurately, Eder spent time with Waheenee's grandson and tested out the role of her 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 Hidatsas.”
— 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 terrain on the continent.

Eder had initially decided not to play Sacajawea, but with the bicentennial of the expedition 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 citizenship for 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 artifacts 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 spectrum of topics — from native history and traits, to questions concerning reservation problems like alcoholism and gambling. At times, Eder has even urged inquisitive members of the audience to reread the history books.

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

In the future, Jeanne Eder does not know who will carry on stories, but she is optimistic. She believes everything evolves in circles so that nothing is ever lost; it all comes back. And so she knows the stories of Zitkala’ sa, Sacajawea and Waheenee will live on.

“I tell the stories kind of like my grandmothers told me. Oh, I think every grandma tells them maybe a little different, but it’s the same story, you see.”

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.”
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 solace 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.

"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.
"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 counselor at the Fort Belknap Chemical Dependency Center. Gone restructured the center's treatments to include native spirituality, bringing 12-step programs 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've become a people with a holistic dysfunction." 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 connectedness. 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 recognizable forms of community collapse, such as crime and alcoholism.

Squeezed between dwindling buffalo, shrinking lands and creeping white culture, Gone's grandfathers quit practicing their spiritual and cultural ways seven generations ago. The more of themselves they relinquished, he says, the less they taught their children and the shared culture of the past slowly pulsed 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 dysfunctional 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." 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 cracking 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 wasn't easy.

"My mom taught me that if I'm going to be living 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 people 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 grandparents did. And she wants to worship the Creator her grandparents called Ih gib nee hoot in their prayers.

Cultural icons surround Michele Main and the students of Hays/Lodgepole High School despite a lack of cultural consensus on the Fort Belknap Reservation.

But some elders say she's too late.

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

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

Organizers for an upcoming Gros Ventre powwow aren’t Gros Ventres themselves. And many dance instructors at SAFEFUTURES, a federally-funded after-school program designed to teach Fort 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 admittedly 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 processions.
"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 generations 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, Cyndee Gone eats jelly-filled cookies in the government-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 traditional 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 grandfathers. "They have to pray from here," she says, tapping 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 sweetgrass. And when Angie arrived on her cement doorstep, Cyndee showed her niece the same way. "This way will help her heal," she says.
Some families show their children the old ways, others show them a way off the reservation. Without our traditions, the old ones warn, we are in danger of...

Losing our culture

Written by MATT OCHSNER
Photographed by TERRY STELLA

It's 7:30 on a frigid Friday night on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. A quiet woman with a subtle smile, Rose Morssett sits at her dining room table, sewing hunks of blue, red and white yarn across the front of achild's yellow sweatshirt.

Her husband, John, makes several trips to and from the kitchen, offering his visitors first Pepsi, then sugar-coated donuts. After 10 minutes he family sits, eager to share jokes and tall stories with tonight's visitors.

Outside the Morssetts' double-wide trailer, 35-mph winds tear across the prairie. From the corner of the living room the low grumble of a police scanner warns of a storm, and with it the potential for flooding. But as they sip their sodas and tell their stories, neither Rose Morssett nor his two companions, Albert Fesse and Curley Youpee, seem too concerned with what the Creator is stirring up this evening. In just a few more minutes they'll be taking turns with the phone, calling friends, making plans for tonight's sweat.

Sprawling across 2.1 million acres in the northeastern corner of the state, the Fort Peck Reservation is the home of the Sioux and Assiniboine tribes, a land of open range and endless wheat fields, few trees and even fewer opportunities.

According to a Bureau of Indian Affairs report, more than half the Native American people here struggle to find work. In the last two years more than a dozen people have been murdered on this reservation, pushing Fort Peck's murder rate 13 times higher than that of the rest of Montana.

The lonely 13-mile stretch of highway connecting Wolf Point and Poplar, the reservation's two largest towns, is dotted by 23 white metallic crosses, each representing a highway fatality. Along this unforgiving ribbon of blacktop sits a faded and battered billboard.

Poplar, the reservation's two largest towns, is dotted by 23 white metallic crosses, each representing a highway fatality. Along this unforgiving ribbon of blacktop sits a faded and battered billboard.

Winona Runsabove slouches on the couch, still exhausted from her senior prom the night before.

“T’was the night before Christmas,” Winona says. “They gave us the finery for life. We had to show it off. But it was all I had.”

About 40 miles away in the modest town of Frazer, a $10,000 RV sits on the Runsaboves' backyard. Given to the family in exchange for a traditional powwow outfit sewn by Danna, the vehicle carries the Runsaboves throughout the Northwest each summer for the steady circuit of powwows.

Winona and Walter, each decked out in full powwow attire.

“T’m the money maker,” Winona joks, speaking of her position as a powwow dancer.

“Ever since I was little, dancing has been like walking to me. Tap, ballet, satin twirling, it’s always come pretty natural to me.”

Montana. And they have told Walter and Winona the story of their great-great-grandfather, who started the reservation’s annual Red Bottom celebration nearly a century ago after a medicine man helped heal his sick son. Held each summer, the event features a community feed, several giveaways and a three-day powwow. Winona has been part of the celebration for each of the past 18 years.

“Know something,” Winona says. “Like with my great grandmother, anything I wanted to know I could ask her. A lot of people my age don’t have that. We’ve told how to learn from our elders, but there aren’t many elders out there anymore for us to talk to.”

Danna has seen this “dying out” of elders, and she realizes its impact on the Assiniboine culture. Walter and Winona are enrolled members of the Northern Cheyenne, the tribe of their father. It was their mother who made this decision.

“I just felt the Cheyenne culture, the Cheyenne traditions are much more openly practiced,” says Danna. “It’s a natural thing compared to (Fort Peck). For many years the Assiniboines didn’t even have their Sun Dance here. It’s like nobody really cared. None of my generation showed any interest in it until the last few years.”

Still, Danna realizes this decision comes with a price.
"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’s wrong."

With the winds still gusting outside of Poplar, Albert Foote and Curley Youpee have left their Pepsis and the warmth of the Morsette’s cozy living room and stepped into the chill of the prairie. The freezing winds slice through their jackets as the mercury dips below 10 degrees. Standing over a pile of wood, illuminated in the stark yellow glow from the headlights of Youpee’s truck, Foote and Youpee hardly notice the bitter cold. It’s a sweat, not the chill, that fills their minds.

In an open area behind the Morsette home, shielded by a rickety wooden windbreak, Foote, a 44-year-old Sioux and Cheyenne mix, and Youpee, a 46-year-old Sioux, begin to build a fire.

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.

Puffing a cigarette and wearing a baseball cap decorated with a picture of a buffalo, Foote tells how he looked to the sweat lodge when he was younger to purify his body and help turn his life around after years of drug and alcohol abuse.

"When I first started out there was a lot of hurt and pain inside of me," said Foote, a counselor at Poplar’s Spotted Bull Treatment Center, a facility that helps troubled teens. "I hurt so much where I couldn’t stand it anymore, and I more or less cried like a baby to get all that stuff out of me. There was a lot of alcohol and a lot of drugs inside me, and the sweat allowed me to get a lot of those poisons out of my body in 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 headlights 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."

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 some types of addiction he used to suffer.

"A lot of young people don’t know who they are. They don’t even know where they come from," says Lorena Red Elk, a 73-year-old Sioux elder.

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

"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 "rosy 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 Runabow 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 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.”

Curly Youpee has an office adjoining a one-room museum of tribal artifacts. He has ambitious plans for building a large cultural tourism center with a museum, archives and educational rooms. The center’s mission, Youpee says, will be to promote tribal cultural preservation, archaeology and linguistics, and to support historical and contemporary research.

Montana’s Indians 17
The power of an arrow

Skipping 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, Alu u t Dekkua, meaning "sending an arrow." Old Horn has been throwing arrows most of his 47 years. A tall, lanky man with a lineless face and salt and pepper hair, Old Horn is quick...
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
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

"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

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.

Rarely does Old Horn tell of his accomplishments although he is one of the tribe's most accomplished arrow throwers. Instead he speaks of his fortunes, how lucky he has been to play against others he respects, and how blessed he has been to have the advice of his brothers and family.

"I have been very fortunate. My reputation as an arrow thrower was accomplished through the help of many clan mothers, fathers and relatives," he says.

Crow customs provide many ways in which people can acquire relatives. Through adoption ceremonies, clan practices and other means, one can find himself with more parents, brothers and sisters and children than biologically possible. Old Horn has several sets of parents, more brothers than he can count and children that, although not related by blood, his children consider to be brothers and sisters.

Back at his house, still sipping his coffee, Old Horn waits for his brother, Barney Old Coyote. Old Horn isn't comfortable talking about arrow throwing without the knowledge of this man. Old Coyote and Old Horn are brothers even though Barney, at 74, could be his father and in many ways acts like one. They speak to each other in Crow, an act common on the reservation and a reason the language is still strong.

Most people on the reservation learn Crow as their first language.

"The language is implicit in everything we do," Old Horn says. "Everything we do is enhanced, enlarged by the language and we are made to develop concepts and ethics and scruples from that same language. Crows believe that First Maker gave us breath. We should be careful of our words, because they define how we conduct ourselves."

Old Coyote's medium build, smooth skin and soft eyes belie the wealth of his experiences and accomplishments. Like Old Horn, Old Coyote also 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.

"My 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 to 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
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 pow­
wows. 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 cho­
en. 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 peo­
ple. 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 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.

Feeling their way

Salish-Kootenai College students are learning their native language and culture through a leadership class that teaches by seeing and doing

Written by JENNIFER BROWN Photographed by LEM PRICE

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 his culture class, knocked on his door nearly two decades ago. Dumontier and her two best friends thought Arlee might help them after they saw him singing and dancing in his part as a Flathead brave in “Jeremiah Johnson,” a Robert Redford movie made in 1971. They thought he could teach them all they wanted to know about culture, not realizing he’d ignored it for more than a decade. The three girls left Arlee High School one sunny spring day and walked down the dusty road where Arlee lives with his wife, Joan. They said they weren’t learning enough about their culture at school and they wanted to learn more. Would he help?

He did. At first, Dumontier acknowledges, it was awkward. Arlee was learning as he taught. But together they succeeded. What started as occasional cultural discussions with tribal elders has now blossomed into 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 tam 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, 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: puwé’ (deer), nč’icən
I 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

Arlee, Quequesah and Pete walk across the barren landscape toward rancher Sid Cross, who has spotted the first bitterroot plants.
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

While Bigcrane spends much of the colder months indoors, her real office is the outdoors where she studies and gathers plants native to the area.

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.
When it's her turn to talk, Bigcrane takes a deep breath, folds her hands in her lap and gently scolds the sellers.

"People have been talking about chemicals, people have been talking about the environment," she says, but reminds them that herb gathering, called wildcrafting, also affects the spirituality of her people. "The realization needs to come that this is not only having an impact on the environment, but on tribes culturally and socially," she says.

She tells them she is fed up with non-tribal members who call and ask her where to find bitterroot, camas, buttercups and lady's slippers. The entrepreneurs need in understanding, but drop their heads in shame when she says she remembers turning down some of their own requests.

Bigrane is the keeper of the secrets of the Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes, the protector of their spiritual livelihood. She fights to secure the future of the tribes' cultural plants. She seeks the plants, nurtures them and shields them from an outside world eager to exploit them.

Bigrane, the Flathead Indian Reservation's herbarium curator, doesn't have a degree in biology. She's not a scientist. She's a Salish woman whose parents taught her how to locate and use native plants, and that's all it takes to do her job, she says.

"The position I play is like a plant protector. A lot of natives were the first ecologists, in a way," she says.

Years ago, Indians used the native plants for medicines, food, tools and clothes. Cultivating them was a way of life, a pattern that became a mainstay of their culture.

"Everything that they needed was based on their environment," Bigrane says. "Plants had a big part of what our culture is, and the identity of our people."

It's a bond between humanity and nature that non-Indians may never understand, she says.

"It's kind of the difference between native things and non-native things. There's a deeper significance that Indians feel."

Out of all the native plants, bitterroot means the most to her.

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 what we are," Bigcrane says.

"Some are looking for money, some are looking for fame," she says. "Every time they take it, it means something to the tribe and the people they took it from."

"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."

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.

Bigrane 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 an 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"