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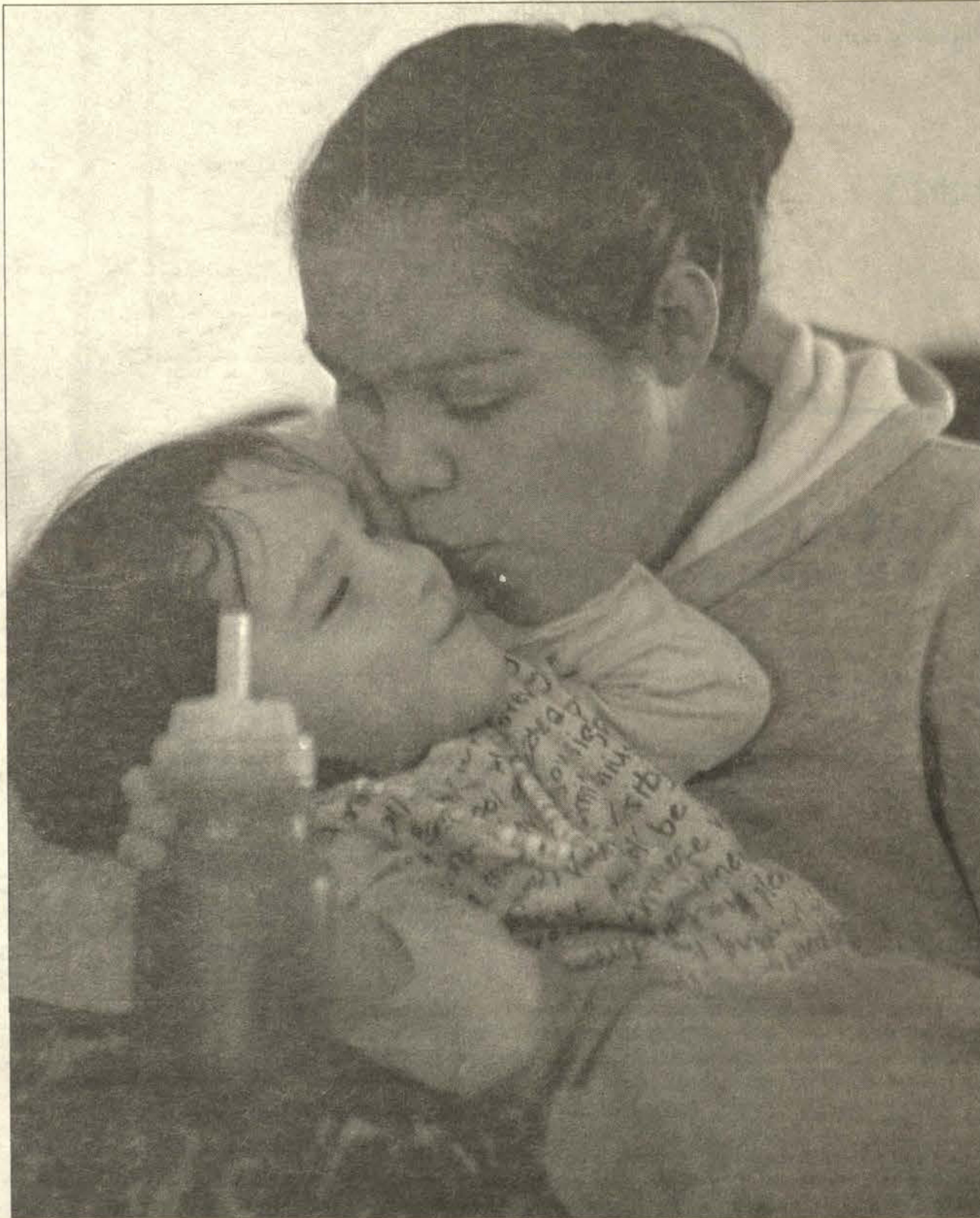
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Montana INDIANS

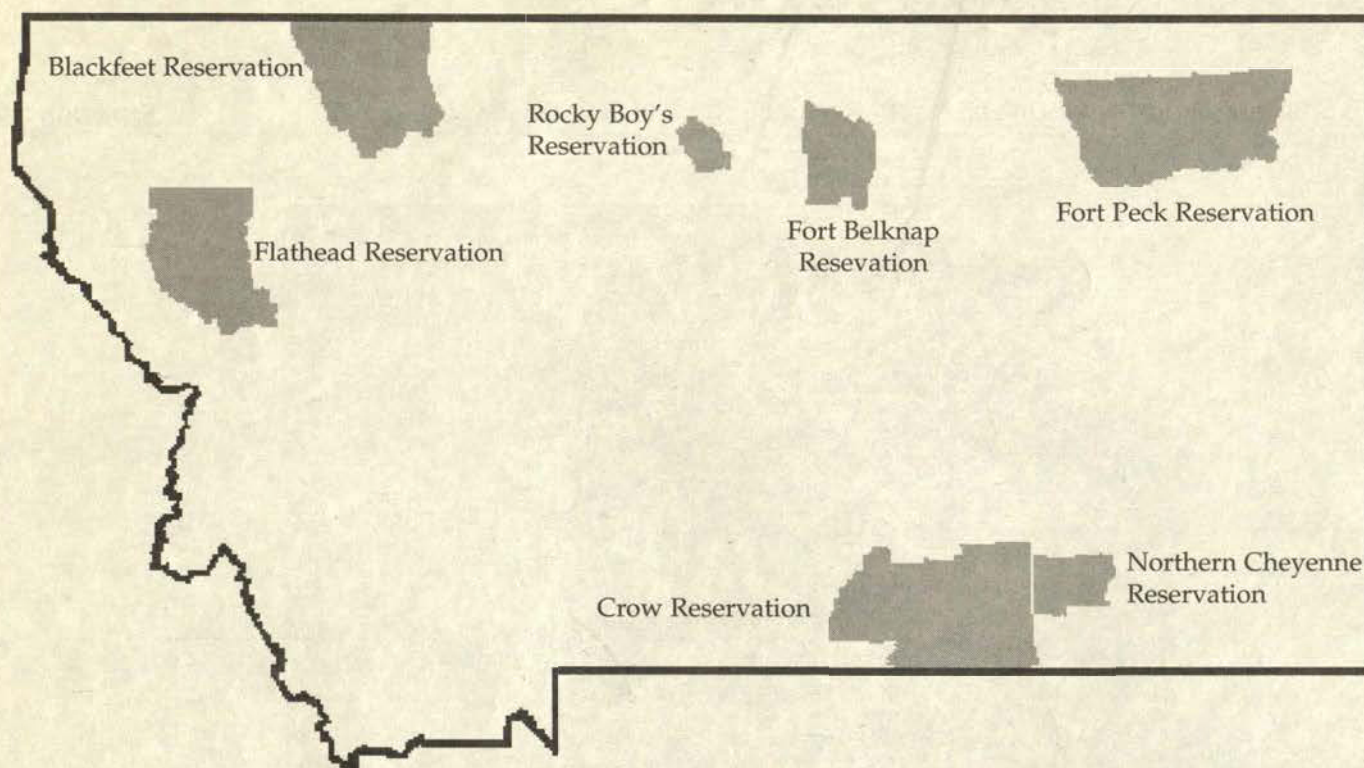
A Special Report by the University of Montana School of Journalism

Summer 2002



The wealth of reservations

For Montana's Indians, riches are in relations



Mitakuya oyasin Cherokee saying, "we are all related"

To 55-year-old Mary Agnes BlackCrow, who lives on the Fort Belknap Reservation, family means raising five of her seven grandchildren, a generation after she raised four children of her own.

To Javon Montes, a young mother from Rocky Boy's Reservation, family means having the means and extra support she needs to raise her 4-year-old twins, Stephon and Jeremiah, while attending the University of Montana full time as an English major.

To Evelyn Old Elk of the Crow Reservation, who at 89 years old has 87 grandchildren, 103 great-grandchildren and 29 great-great-grandchildren, family is her life.

Family on Montana's seven reservations is as important as the land, or more. It is the foundation of the tribe and the heart of the people.

Native Americans generally define family in broad terms. Extended families often live together. Adults who form close bonds with a family are "adopted" by the family and treated as close kin. Sharing is expected in an Indian family. Individual accomplishments are successes for the whole family and the tribe.

The spiritual center of Native America also resides in the family. Since churches were not part of the Indian culture, many Montana Indian families today retain cer-

emonial sweat lodges at their homes where friends and extended family members gather to pray. Older family members pray and sing in the perfect darkness of the sweat lodge, while the young quietly soak up traditions and language, which they will pass on to another generation when they have families of their own.

Indian families survive today in spite of the social ills that have threatened to destroy them. For decades families were torn apart as government agents tried to assimilate Indian children into a white world by removing them from their families and placing them in far off boarding schools. Disease, alcoholism and an ever-dwindling land base take their toll. Indian families suffer the consequences of these social ills, yet most cling desperately to one familiar constant, the family bond.

The Adams family of the Flathead Reservation — more than 40 strong — gathers each month to celebrate successes, tell stories, and to discuss in a very deliberate way the hardships that family members face. Louis Adams, the patriarch, gathers the family on his land at the foot of the Mission Mountains and with children, grandchildren, aunts and uncles quietly gathered, encourages discussion of the good and bad times that affect the family. The family meetings and the kinship they foster have come to define what it means to be the Adams family.

Surnames help identify white families, but for some natives, such as George Kicking Woman, it's the ceremonial name bestowed later in life that carries with it meaning. Kicking Woman knows that Indian family names sometimes reflect confusion, rather than kinship. A 90-year-old Blackfeet, his family name was altered in translation when a government agent misunderstood — or ignored — Kicking Woman's parents as he recorded their son's birth. Now Kicking Woman is revered on his reservation as the elder who bestows names of honor for his people.

Geri Small's Northern Cheyenne tribe fled on foot to their homeland in Montana in 1878 after being transplanted to present-day Oklahoma by the federal government. The tribe eventually secured a permanent home in Montana and today Small is the first woman president of her tribe. She says that family is her biggest support and the strength she draws from how she was raised and the support she gets today help her do her job.

These are the stories of only a handful of Montana's 66,300 Indian peoples. They provide but a brief snapshot of their lives, but we hope they offer some insights into the ties the bond the state's American Indian families. After all, mitakuya oyasin.

— Jared Miller and Courtney Lowery

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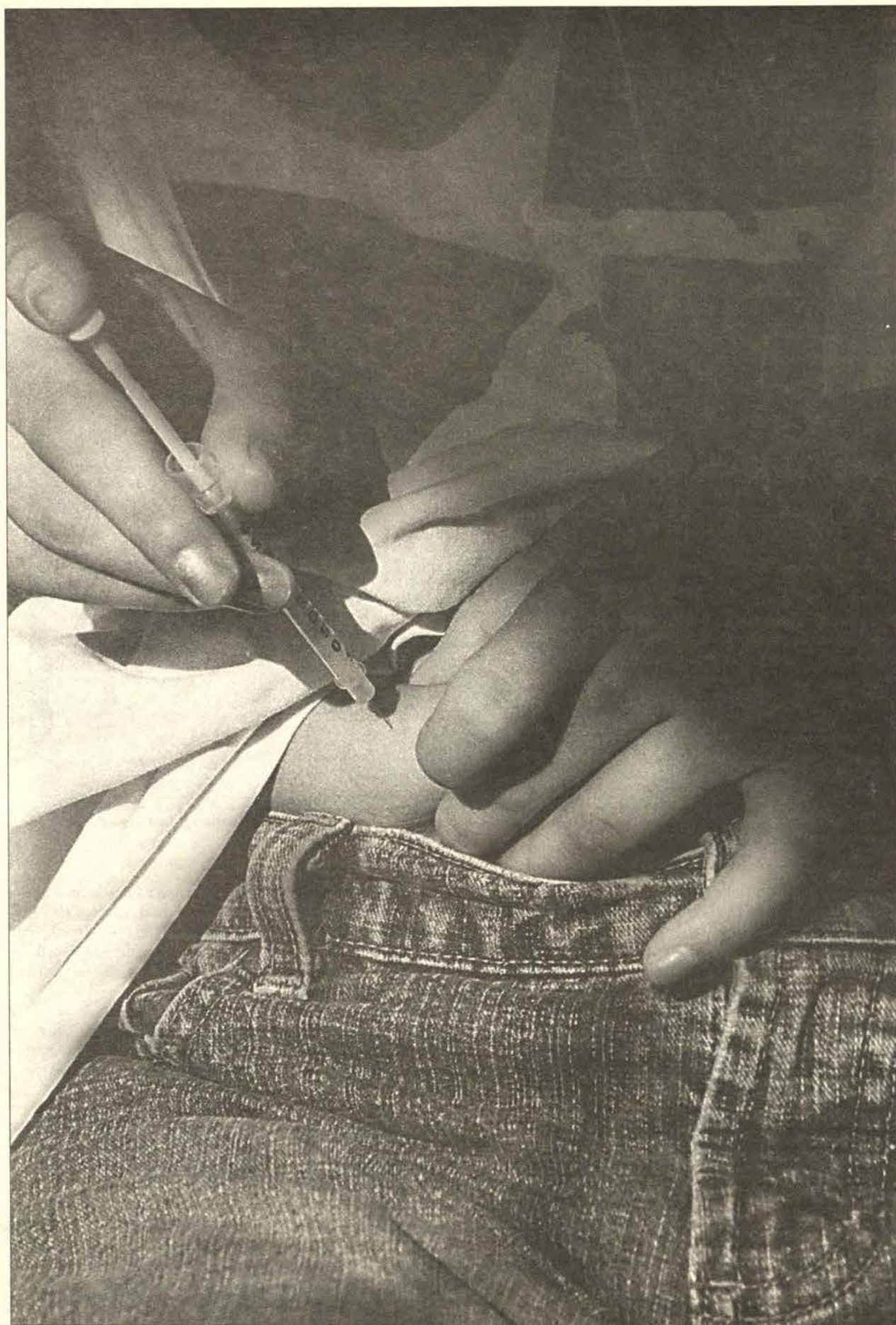
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Rosebud Dupree injects her belly with one of the two daily doses of insulin that her body requires to function. When Rosebud was first diagnosed at the tender age of 6 her older sisters had to learn how to give the injections. Now, says Rosebud, she's even taught some of her close friends how to give the shot.

Living by the needle

*Diabetes is epidemic among
Indians, striking
at twice the rate
it does to white people.
For the Duprees on the
Fort Peck Reservation, the
disease has been part of their
family dynamic for
generations.*

Sammi Ray Dupree stopped giving herself insulin shots at school after a classmate accused her of shooting up crank.

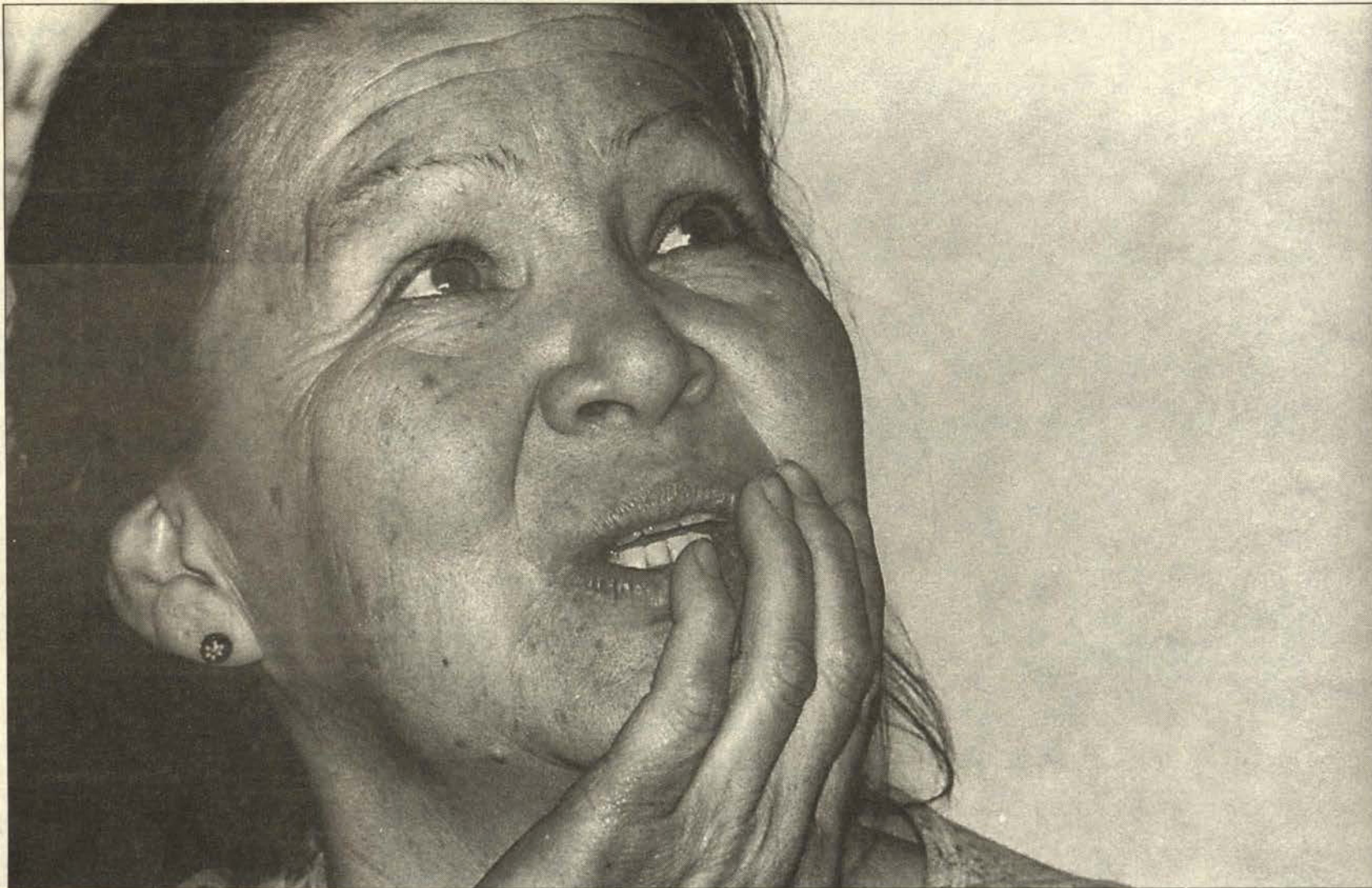
Like two others in her family, 14-year-old Sammi is an insulin-dependent diabetic and must inject herself with insulin twice a day. That means giving herself a shot between classes at the junior high school she attends in Poplar on the Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana.

Sammi has permission from teachers to give herself insulin in the relative privacy of a bathroom stall, but in Poplar, which has a severe problem with methamphetamine use, hypodermic needles have a bad connotation.

So when Sammi's classmate saw her capping a needle as she walked out of a stall, the girl assumed the worst. Sammi is sensitive about her condition to begin with, and after being falsely accused, she'd had enough.

"Ever since then," Sammi says, "I never did it at school anymore. I just wait until I get home."

Sammi and her family are struggling to live with Type I diabetes, a form of the disease uncommon in



With a diabetic husband, two diabetic daughters, a live-in grandson with optic nerve problems and personal struggles with a seven-year battle against breast cancer, Gail Charboneau always has her family and their well-being on her mind.

American Indians. Type II, which usually develops first in adulthood, is epidemic among Indians, affecting more than 12 percent, twice the rate of occurrence in the white population. The incidence at Fort Peck mirrors the national rate at 12 percent.

Sammi, a sister and her father all live with this life-threatening disease. It's been both a physical and emotional struggle, made even more difficult when the girls' mother contracted cancer, which is the second leading cause of death in American Indian women.

American Indian families are hard hit by disease. Indians in Montana have a life expectancy of 10 years less than white Americans nationwide. And the federal government spends half as much per tribal member as it does for health programs for other Americans. Furthermore, in many Indian families, like the Duprees, while health concerns are pressing, the ways in which they cope are complicated.

Sammi says she hates living with her diabetes, hates the way it makes her different from her classmates and hates

talking about it.

The youngest of five sisters, she shares the illness with her 19-year-old sister, Rosebud, and her 51-year-old father, Raymond Dupree. All three have Type I diabetes, which means their bodies produce no insulin.

Insulin is a protein made by the pancreas that allows sugar from the bloodstream to be transferred to the cells for use as energy. For Type I diabetics, in order to keep blood sugar from getting too high — a condition that can lead to a coma and eventually death if not treated — insulin must be injected into the bloodstream.

Type I used to be called juvenile-onset diabetes since it usually appears during adolescence. Rosebud developed diabetes when she was 6. Her mother, Gail Charboneau, remembers Rosebud asking one night for glass after glass of tea with

sugar. Gail didn't know at the time that excessive thirst, along with frequent urination, are warning signs of diabetes.

Yet while she didn't recognize the symptoms of diabetes, Gail certainly knew the treatment, having learned to give insulin shots to her grandmother when she was 14, as well as living with a diabetic husband.

When Rosebud first became sick, Gail carried her into the emergency room at the Poplar hospital at 2 a.m., but the clerk at the front desk didn't understand the seriousness of her condition and told Gail to come back at 8 a.m. Realizing that her child was in danger, Gail ignored the

clerk and stormed past her to the doctor on duty. The physician took one look at Rosebud and tested her blood sugar. Normal blood sugar content is from 70 to 120 milligrams per deciliter. Rosebud's level was

907. It wasn't long before she lapsed into a coma and had to be flown to Billings for treatment. She survived, but from that point on, she and her family were saddled with the lifelong responsibility of caring for a diabetic.

Diabetes can kill, but it can also be controlled by insulin, diet and exercise. However, what Gail Charboneau faced five years ago was not so easily conquered.

Gail was diagnosed with breast cancer and because of the severity of her condition she needed experimental treatment the Indian Health Service would not cover.

Doctors warned that Gail would die without the stem-cell treatment, but the \$80,000 price was far beyond the family's reach. They searched for programs or grants that might provide the money Gail would need to have a shot at survival.

Even as she grew sicker, Gail tried everything to earn the money. One day as she dug echinacea roots to sell, her sister came running to tell her that her mother, Myrna Charboneau, had found a

"I wouldn't want my kids to go through the same things I went through. I'd probably try to talk to them, but I don't know until that time comes."

Rosebud Dupree on how she might help her own children if they are diagnosed with diabetes

way.

After hearing pleadings from Myrna, the family says a doctor at the Indian Health Service in Washington, D.C., was able to redirect money set aside in a disaster fund to pay for Gail's treatment.

"I was just happy, because this thing was hanging over my head and if I didn't have it, you know, I was gonna die and what'd happen to my girls?" Gail says. "That was the best thing I ever heard."

Within 24 hours, Gail and Myrna were on their way to Billings for the treatment Gail needed. But her stay would be long and the treatment difficult so Gail sent her daughters to live with their eldest sister in California, splitting up the family. Myrna, a nurse, knew Gail would need her, so she went along, though it meant giving up her job.

Again, money seemed a barrier. Faced with no income and setting up a second household 300 miles from home, again Myrna found a way. She sold her mineral rights on land that she owned at Fort Peck, land that had been deeded to her family during the allotment of the reservation.

Gail and Myrna moved to Billings to begin the treatment. But paperwork from the Indian Health Service didn't arrive so they spent the first month waiting.

At Christmas, Gail's daughters came to visit, but her doctor warned that she shouldn't leave the hospital.

She remembers his words exactly: "He said, 'You know, you're a walking dead woman,' because I had no immune system."

But Gail went anyway and while she was with them, she sneezed, and her nose started bleeding and wouldn't stop. Her family rushed her back to the hospital and she was given pills to help her blood clot.

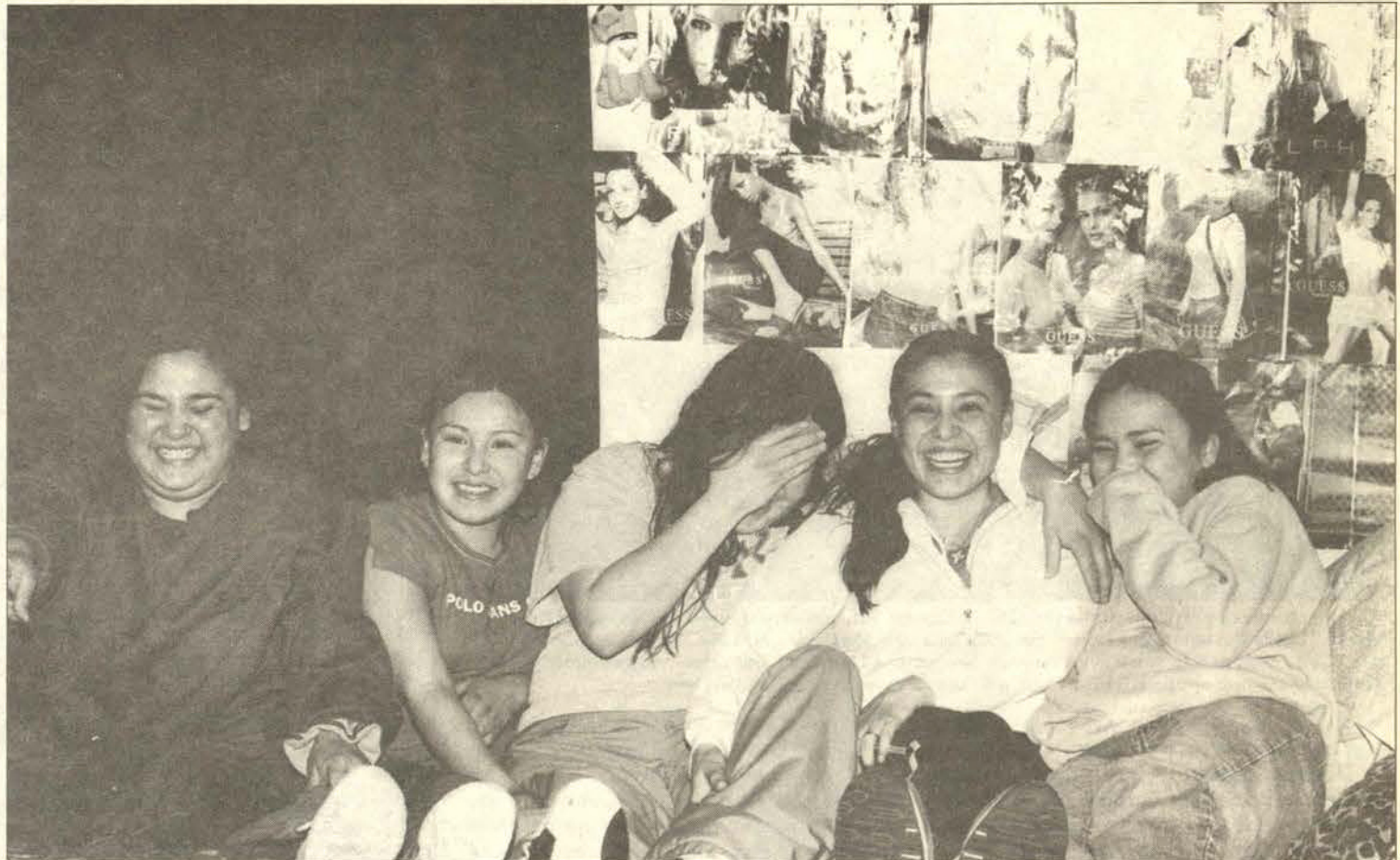
Even with all that, Gail says the most difficult part of her treatment, which lasted a year, was being away from her family.

Eager to get back to Poplar, she was relieved to hear that some final stages of her treatment could be completed on the reservation. So she moved home, then found it wasn't so. They returned to Billings and completed the regimen, then went back to Poplar so she could resume taking care of her children.

After spending her life caring for others, cancer had forced Gail to care for herself. But she's now been cancer-free for three years and has gone back to worrying about the other potentially deadly disease that affects her family.

Just as Gail now understands intimately the physical havoc cancer can wreak, she knew already the damage diabetes can do. She and her sisters watched their grandmother suffer from the disease.

Gail's sister Jeannette Charboneau lived with her grandmother for a time and remembers the way diabetes slowly ate away at her body.



The Dupree sisters, from left, Raylene, Sammi Ray, Shyann, Billie Ray and Rosebud gather for a photo opportunity in the youngest, Sammi Ray's room. The girls got the giggles after Raylene, squeezed on to the side of the bed, breaking the springs and collapsing the backside of Sammi's new bed. Despite the surprise, the five seemed happy just to be together.

"They cut first her foot off, then this part off," Jeannette says as she points to her calf. "Then she got this other one (foot) cut off. And she lost her sight, and after she lost her sight she just decided to kind of give up. She wouldn't eat. After two weeks, she starved. She said she had a long life. She was 89."

Diabetes is a full-time disease that cannot be ignored.

Pauline Boxer works for Fort Peck Diabetes Outreach and after having watched her own mother die from the disease, and then getting it herself, she has devoted her life to educating other Indians how to live with it. She says she knew the disease only as a name growing up, but never thought about its implications or that she might someday get it.

"When I found out I was a diabetic, it about blew my mind," she says. "I said 'I don't want to be a diabetic,' because I seen what my mother went through. My mother was a Type II diabetic; she ended up on dialysis, she ended up getting her fingers chopped off, she went blind, she lost her hearing, and then she just had a heart attack. I don't want to see anybody go through that."

Pauline knows many people are in denial about diabetes but she knows too well the consequences.

"I look around and I see people younger than I am that are completely blind because they don't want to do any-

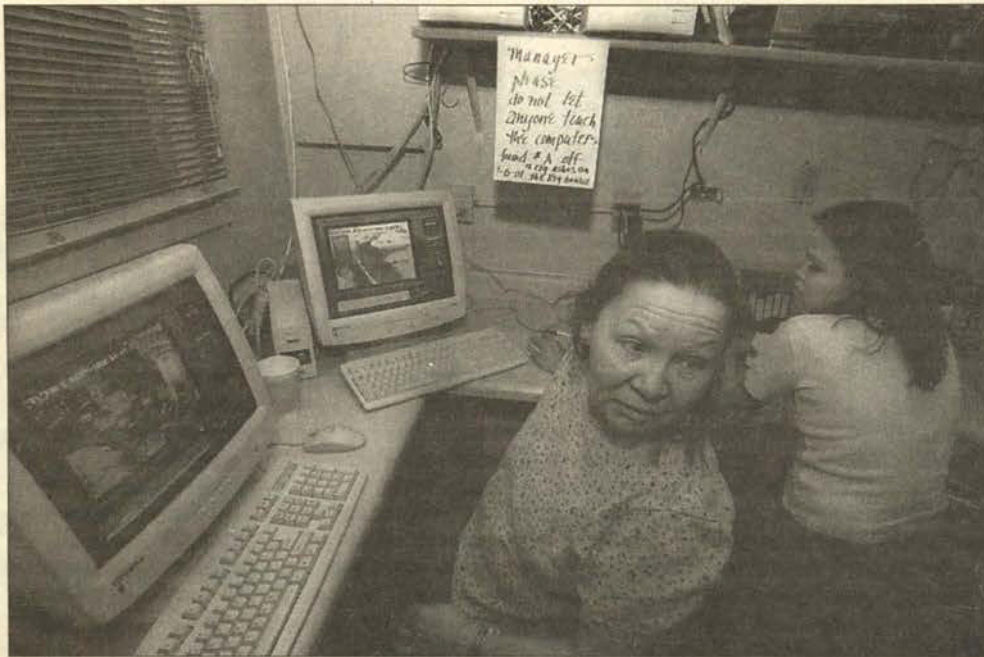


Family members, from left, Billie Ray, Brenden, Rosebud, Sammi Ray and Brady, gather around their mother's table for dinner. Even though Sammi Ray is the only child still living with Gail Charboneau, Gail's home is always filled with family. Billy Ray says it's a place where the Dupree children can get together and resolve problems they have.

thing with their diabetes," 58-year-old Pauline says. "They don't want to take any kind of education. They don't want to commit to the program and listen to the nutritionist. They don't want to come in and see the foot doctor. They don't want to get their eyes checked. They think they have diabetes and nothing else is

gonna happen to them. But that's not true. People are losing their limbs because of diabetes, people are going blind because of diabetes. People are having heart attacks, people are ending up on dialysis. It's a sad thing to see most of our Indian people with diabetes."

Although the Dupree family deals



Gail Charboneau peers out of the tiny Tribal Express office where she and her daughter Rosebud work. Gail is the manager of three gas stations along Montana's Hi-Line. Her sister Jeannette says Gail continued to work even through her battle with cancer and often works double shifts. Gail says she just appreciates the chance to keep a close eye on her daughter.

with the less common Type I diabetes, the health risks are still formidable.

Understanding the risks, Gail's daughter Billie Ray Dupree, 24, is determined to limit her chances of getting diabetes as much as she can with a strict workout schedule. She runs on a treadmill five days a week, and her goal is to run seven miles in 35 minutes.

She hopes to avoid the kind of health problems that her father, Raymond, has had to deal with.

Raymond, 51, was told five years ago he would be blind within a year, but has managed to keep his vision so far.

Rosebud, now 19, has gone into a high-blood-sugar-induced coma more times than Gail cares to count and has already been referred for dialysis treatment, though she has managed to avoid it by taking better care of herself. If diabetics let their blood sugar fluctuate too much, it can eventually lead to kidney failure. Dialysis cleans a person's blood of toxins when their kidneys begin to fail.

Rosebud sounds resigned to the probable progression of her disease and eventual dialysis.

"If I need it, I'll probably just go ahead and do it," Rosebud says, but also says she accepts what might happen.

"I'm just not afraid of dying," she says.

Rosebud is also on a list to receive a pancreas transplant. The pancreas produces insulin and is usually transplanted in concert with a kidney. But because of the powerful immunosuppressant drugs a person must take to keep the body from attacking the foreign organ, 15 percent of patients who receive a new pancreas die within five years.

Jeannette says Rosebud's outlook changed after she came out of one of her more recent comas and that since then she's been taking better care of herself.

"Rosebud came out of that coma different," Jeannette says. "Her whole perspective was more positive."

Gail and her sister Jeannette are pleased with what they see as progress on some fronts, but still worry about Rosebud, who has been living by herself for four months.

"She's got her phone shut off now," Gail says. "God, if somebody doesn't hear her, you know? What if one of these days we go over there, she's in a coma? I just want to move her back to the house; I'm not comfortable."

And even if Rosebud is better, Gail thinks she has a way to go before she is doing all she must to get healthy.

"She won't even go over there (to the hospital) by herself," Gail says. "She's still like a child. She'll come over to the house and sit there, 'Mom, I'm sick.' I say 'You want to go the hospital?' She goes, 'Yeah.' She won't go over there by herself, so she waits around for me to take her. She gets dehydrated. She was wearing a size 9 pant, and she's down to like a 5 now. It just takes a toll on her."

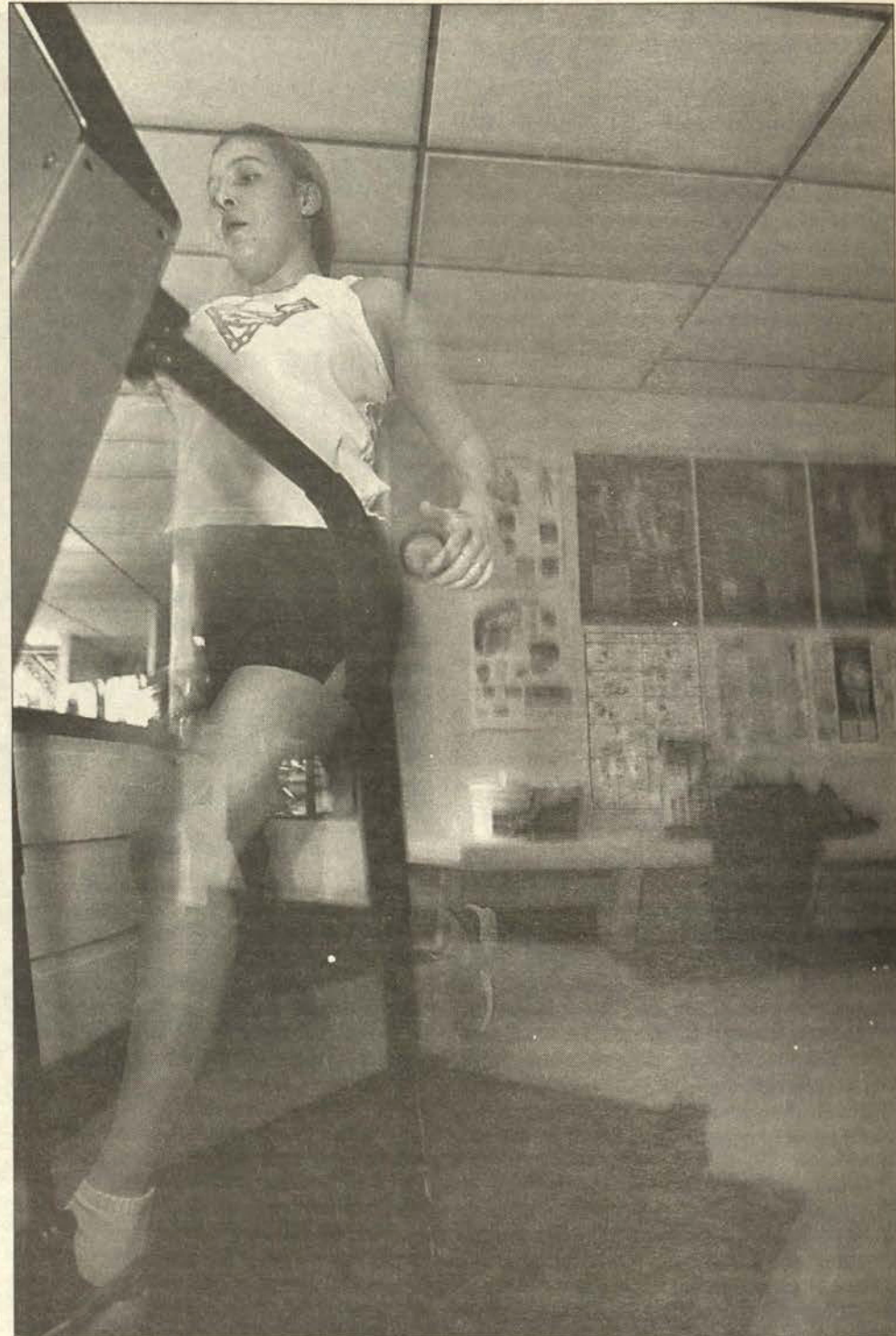
Both Rosebud and Sammi say Raymond was a poor role model with his denial of his disease.

"Probably where I learned to be ashamed of my diabetes is from my dad," Sammi says. "He don't talk about it at all."

Gail agrees.

"It probably comes from their dad," she says. "You know when I first met him, I heard he was diabetic, but I'd never really seen any of his medicine until 8 months later when he got sick. He's done insulin shots since he was 15. I mean he kept it from me, he wouldn't even tell me he was diabetic. I knew he was. He's real private. He won't tell anybody and if he got sick, he just got sick."

Raymond declined to speak about his



Determined, strong-willed and energetic, Billie Ray Dupree works out daily to care for her body and keep fit, in light of her genetic disposition toward developing diabetes.

illness for this story. Gail says after Raymond developed diabetes when he was 15, he would have to walk to the health clinic every day to get his insulin shot. He has hated going to clinics ever since.

"He still to this day won't go up and get his own medicine," Gail says.

Gail says Raymond's fear of getting help and his denial of the disease have had their effect on Rosebud and Sammi. She says because Raymond doesn't always eat enough, he frequently goes into seizures from low blood sugar and has to be held down to have Kool-Aid poured in his mouth.

"It scars the girls the most seeing their dad like that," Gail says. "They never want to be like that."

Rosebud says if she has children, she hopes things will be different, but isn't sure they will be.

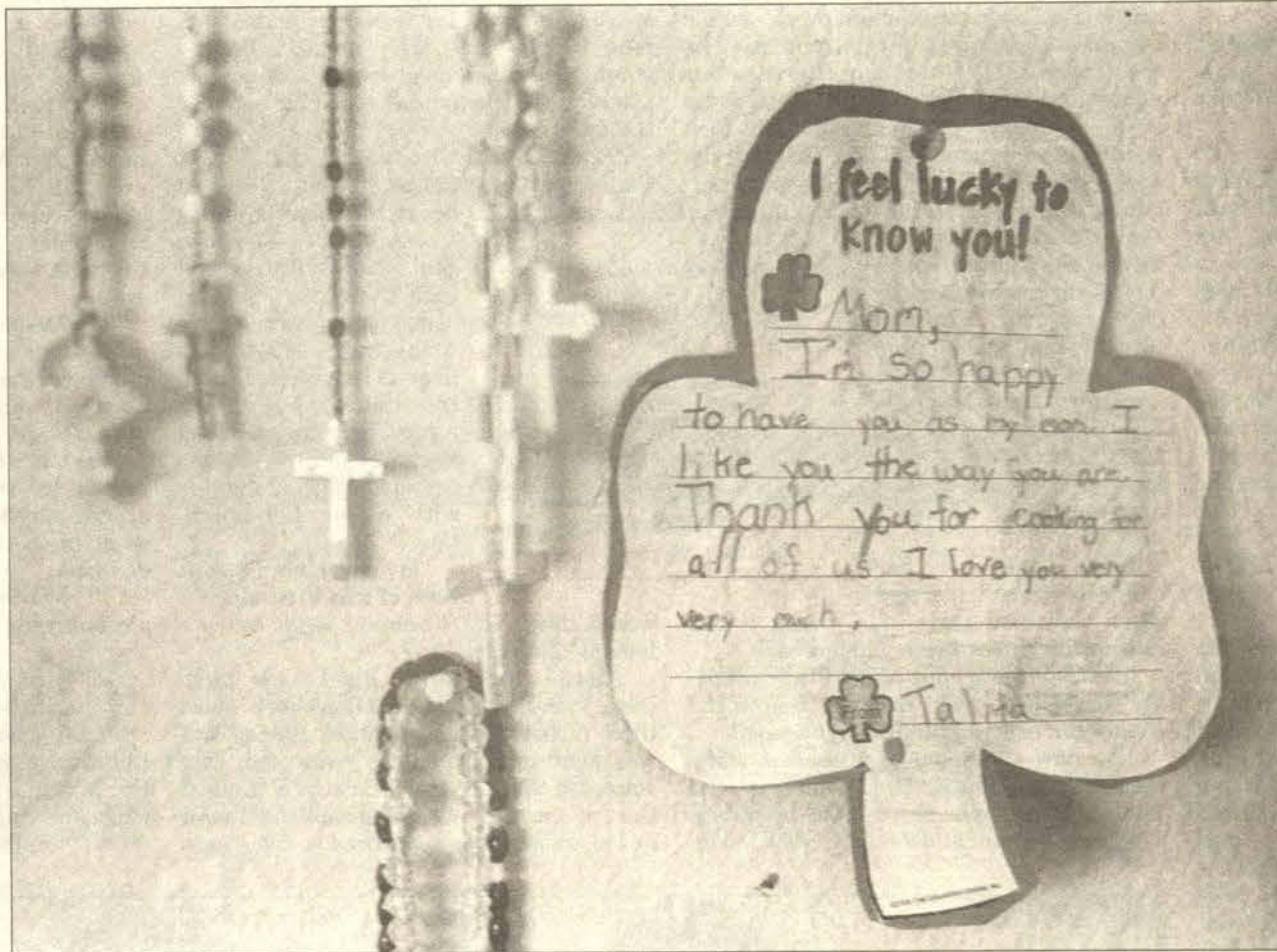
"I wouldn't want my kids to go through the same things I went through," she says. "I'd probably try to talk to them, but I don't know until that time comes."

Sammi still struggles to come to terms with her illness.

"I don't like it at all," Sammi says. "I hate living with it. It really sucks."

And Gail, dealing with two daughters and a husband with diabetes, just tries to take it as it comes.

"You have to deal with it one day at a time," Gail says. "Living by the needle isn't easy."



The wall above the kitchen table holds ten rosaries, a few crosses and a crucifix. Next to the rosaries is a card Mary Agnes BlackCrow's granddaughter Talita gave to her on St. Patrick's Day, in which she addresses Mary Agnes as "mom" and thanks her for her love and caring nature.

Reversing a cycle, carrying a tradition

Mary Agnes BlackCrow, like many Indian grandparents, raises five of her seven grandchildren. Remembering a rocky childhood of her own, her life has been devoted to a new beginning two generations later.

An old cardboard wall was the closest thing to privacy Mary Agnes BlackCrow ever saw growing up on Montana's Fort Belknap Reservation. It was a makeshift divider in a one-bedroom house that was shared at times by as many as 20 people.

Mary Agnes remembers that at first her parents went out occasionally in the evenings. They went dancing with friends as an escape from their six children. But eventually the evenings out were frequent. Dancing with friends turned into drinking, and soon strangers came home with them from the bar. On cold nights Mary Agnes says her parents and their friends huddled

around the only heater in the house — where the children slept — and drank.

"It was a terrible letdown," Mary Agnes says wistfully. "My brother and I, we were used to having them there all the time and just being parents."

Before her parents' lives were awash in alcohol, Mary Agnes remembers coming home from school to the sweet smell of raisin pies in the wood stove. Her mother, a cook at the school in Hays, wore pretty dresses and a flowered apron. They ate hearty meat and potato dinners with garden vegetables and freshly baked desserts. Mary Agnes remembers learning how to cook for the first time — fried eggs that she collected from the chick-

ens that the family tended. She remembers chopping wood with her father, and when he bought her a new doll.

"I had it about a week, and I lost it," Mary Agnes says. "Boy, that was very heartbreaking. He bought it brand new, right from the store, and we hardly ever got things like that."

But when Mary Agnes' parents turned to the bottle, the happy memories began to vanish.

At 6 years old, the little girl took quilts, draped them over the headboard of the bed where she and her five siblings slept, and tightly tucked the comforters into the frame. She called it their little house — a place

"It was a terrible letdown. My brother and I, we were used to having them there all the time and just being parents."

Mary Agnes BlackCrow, on how she felt when her parents started drinking frequently.

where she learned to shelter her younger brothers and sisters from the ugliness outside. A quality she carried with her through life.

"I had a terrible resentment toward my mom for awhile," Mary Agnes says, "because I always looked up to her to take care of us."

Instead it was Mary Agnes, still a child herself, who got up early to cook for her younger brothers and sisters and take care of the six nieces and nephews her mother raised. She taught herself to change their dirty diapers and get them dressed for the day. By the seventh grade, she was sewing most of her own clothing.

Today, at 55 years old, Mary Agnes credits the hardships in her childhood for the woman she is now. And it's why she is raising five of her seven grandchildren, to protect them from the same uncertainties she faced as she watched her parents lose themselves to drink.

"It was just a thing that you had to take care of your family long ago," Mary Agnes says.

She is making certain that the newest generation of BlackCrows is taken care of.

An Assiniboine tradition that dictates grandparents raise the eldest grandchild is still in practice today in both the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes living on Fort Belknap Reservation in northcentral Montana. Mary Agnes, half Assiniboine and half Gros Ventre, and her husband, Joseph, a full-blooded Gros Ventre, not only raise their eldest grandchild, but have willingly taken in four more of their seven grandchildren. The BlackCrows live in Hays, 35 miles south of Harlem, with Ashley, 15, Bridgette, 13, Cameron, 12, Thorne, 9, and Talita, 8.

According to the 2000 Census, 27 percent of non-traditional families at Fort Belknap are composed of grandparents 65 years and older raising their grandchildren. There are many younger grandparents among the 5,000 enrolled members who, like Mary Agnes and Joseph, also rear grandchildren, whether by custom or necessity, but whose households don't show up in this census category.

Mary Agnes wakes up surrounded by framed pictures of her children on her bedroom walls. The first thing she does each day is pray. First, always, she thanks God for her grandchildren. Then she gives thanks for her own life, so that she can help the youngest BlackCrows grow. Then it's rush, rush, rush to get the youngsters up and out the door in time for school. But this morning is a weekend family day at the BlackCrow household, and Mary Agnes moves more slowly.

The morning light peeks through a thin curtained window as Ashley BlackCrow flips pancakes over a hot grill. The tall, slender 15-year-old stacks one pancake after the other on a growing pile and offers her grandmother a sample. Mary Agnes takes a bite, decides it is too soft and sends Ashley back to the batter with a few tips.

Ashley's father, Clarence Andrew BlackCrow, recently divorced, is living with his parents until he gets his life in order. He does construction work, which requires some travel, but Clarence says he tries to see Ashley every day. Clarence was young and single when his daughter was born, so Mary Agnes and Joseph took Ashley in at 6 months of age. In 1989, the couple legally adopted her. By summertime this year, Mary Agnes and Joseph hope to be the legal guardians of five of their seven grandchildren, four of whom already call them Mom and Dad.

"They don't have no future with their folks," Mary Agnes says. "They keep asking me, 'When are you going to adopt us?'"

Mary Agnes says her children weren't married when they had their kids, which is one reason she raises the grandchildren.

"Their parents split up and they probably would have been in foster homes if I wasn't the caring grandma," she says.

By now the smell of breakfast wafts through the house. But Cameron and Thorne BlackCrow don't seem to notice. The two grandchildren are more con-

cerned with the video games they're playing and who is going to win.

Cameron, the quieter of the two, has small dark eyes and a serious expression most of the time. When asked what he wants to be when he grows up, he answers proudly, as though he has put a lot of thought into it.

"First, I want to go to the Army," Cameron says, "and after that I want to become an astronaut."

Joseph Florence BlackCrow III, Cameron and Bridgette's father, spent three years in the Army until 1990. He lives in a trailer next to the house, but Mary Agnes says his children are safer living with her because he struggles with an alcohol addiction.

"My grandma's taken care of me ever since I was 3 days old," Cameron says. And he likes it that way.

Thorne and Talita BlackCrow have been living at their grandmother's since their father, Gerard Francis BlackCrow, was sent to prison four years ago. The youngest son in the BlackCrow family, Gerard was convicted of assaulting a man in Polson and was sentenced to five years

in prison, followed by 15 years of probation.

Mary Agnes blames alcohol for the problems in her children's lives. Gerard was drinking when he got into the fight, she says, and Joseph dropped out of the Army because of his addiction.

"It (alcohol) has slowed up my boys' lives," says Mary Agnes, who has higher expectations for her grandchildren. She knows what alcohol did to her parents and to her own family and she's determined the cycle won't repeat itself in a third generation.

"My husband drank while I was raising my kids, and they seen him," she says, and it affected her own children in a way she hopes it won't touch her children's children. Joseph has been sober for 15 years.

"We don't drink now," she says. "We try not to let them (the grandchildren) be around alcohol so much, and I tell them what happens when they (their parents) do drink."

"They're safer with me with all this alcohol going around."

Growing up, Mary Agnes wanted to be a nurse. The little girl liked school and hoped to go to college. But things at home were getting worse. Her father, a WWII veteran, suffered from what she knows now was post-traumatic stress syndrome and severe nervous

Their parents split up and they probably would have been in foster homes if I wasn't the caring grandma.

Mary Agnes BlackCrow on why she chose to raise her five grandchildren



Five BlackCrow grandchildren, from left, Talita, 8, Ashley, 15, Cameron, 12, Brenda, 9, and Thorne, 9, make the sign of the cross after saying grace before diving into a Saturday morning pancake breakfast that Ashley made for the family.

make the sign of the cross after saying

breakdowns, which usually landed him in the hospital. Overwhelmed by his extreme outbursts and her parents' alcoholism, Mary Agnes wanted an escape.

It was Christmas Eve 1962 and Mary Agnes, 15, had a blind date. She and her cousin planned to meet Joseph BlackCrow, an older boy, outside St. Paul's Mission Church after midnight Mass. Mary Agnes looks back now and laughs. She calls it puppy love. But a little more than a year later, she and Joseph were married and expecting their first child, Quentin Joseph BlackCrow.

The dream of a career in nursing vanished, but she did find an escape. She'd have her own family and it would be big—eight or 10 kids, maybe more.

However, in 1965, Quentin Joseph, 18 months old, ran out of the yard and was killed by a drunken driver.

Mary Agnes, only 17, refused to talk about the death or even to accept it.

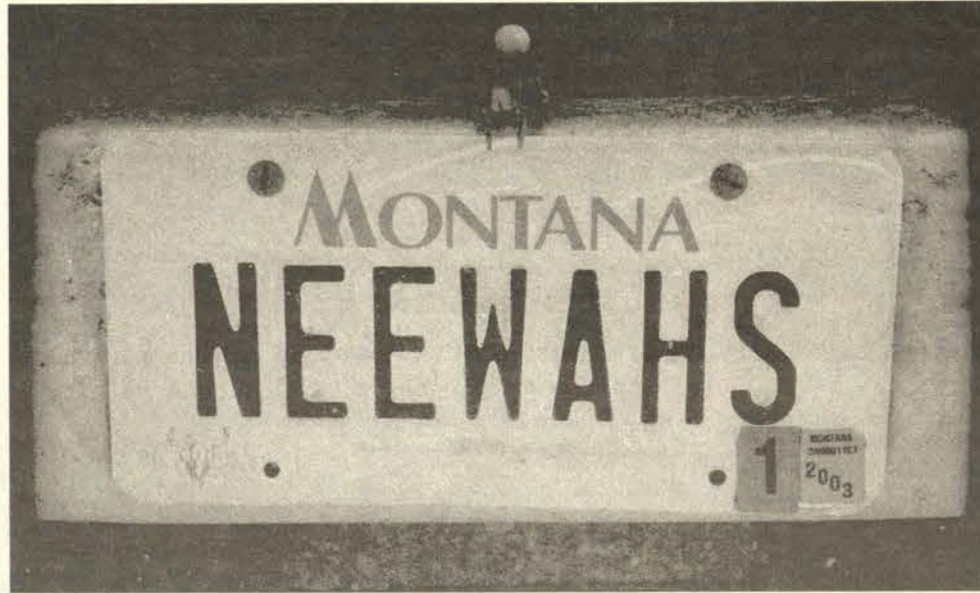
"I was very young at the time and didn't understand death real good," she says.

Already pregnant with her next son, Joseph Florence BlackCrow III, Mary Agnes says her response was to have more children. By the time she was 25, she was a mother of four. But during the birth of her son Gerard, complications arose. Doctors feared the baby might suffocate in the womb. They induced labor and Gerard was born healthy, but Mary Agnes knew she would never have another child.

Thinking back to the hysterectomy that followed, Mary Agnes says her grandchildren have filled a void in her that opened long ago.

"I knew what they were taking out of me and I felt like I had a big hole in my stomach," she says. "I always wanted more kids and I couldn't have them. So it's like a blessing to have grandkids."

Asked what life might be like without



The license plate on Mary Agnes' van reads "NEEWAHS," which means "Grandma's" in her native language, Gros Ventre. It's also the name of the traditional dance group that features Mary Agnes' grandkids.

her grandchildren, Mary Agnes can barely imagine it.

"If I didn't have my grandkids?" She repeats the question as though the thought has never occurred to her before. Mary Agnes considers it for a moment and says, "I'd feel very empty."

The Saturday morning breakfast is ready, and the kids huddle around the kitchen table. They crowd in toward a fat stack of pancakes that are burned slightly on the edges, but no one seems to mind. Mary Agnes leads her grandchildren in grace — a prayer each has memorized by heart.

"My grandparents always told me," says Mary Agnes, "before you do anything, you pray."

Ten rosaries are draped over nails on the kitchen wall next to a couple of crosses and a crucifix. A card that Talita made for her grandmother starts out, "I'm so happy to have you as my mom."

Mary Agnes smiles. "Everything they give me, I keep," she says.

Mary Agnes sits at the table and flips through a black scrapbook she made. Her black shoulder-length hair brushes the sides of her face and her ever-present purple-tinted sunglasses. She is a soft, round grandmother — the kind that children love to cuddle.

She turns the page to a souvenir Elvis Presley driver's license and laughs at the silly teenage crush she still hangs on to. On other pages are birth certificates, baptismal certificates and all of her children's high school diplomas.

"Education is very important to me you know," Mary Agnes says. "I teach them (her grandchildren) that if they want to get by in this world they got to learn to take care of themselves."

She remembers pushing education on her own kids too.

"I said, 'I don't care how you get it, but I want that diploma,' and I have them all," she says with obvious pride.

Mary Agnes then turns the page to several newspaper clippings of the Nee-wah's Dance Troupe. The five grandchildren who share her home, plus Brenda, who lives with her mother in Chinook, make up Grandma's Dance Troupe — the literal translation. Each year the Nee-wah's Dance Troupe travels to four or five powwows, mostly in Montana, where they are usually paid \$25 a performance, plus free gas and lodging. At the Lewis and Clark Powwow — probably the most prestigious — in Great Falls, the children perform the round dance. Each child weaves through the audience and offers someone a piece of handmade jewelry before inviting the person to come up and dance with them. It's how they've met friends and pen pals from

all over the country.

"I'm always wanting to meet someone new," Mary Agnes says. "It's fascinating to meet people that don't know about Indians. It feels good to tell them about us."

To the left of her kitchen is the sewing room, a sectioned off area where Mary Agnes spends most of her day. She sits at an old wooden desk next to the window and grips a needle and thread between pursed lips. Later this afternoon, the grandchildren will practice their dance routines, but first Thorne's costume needs mending.

Scraps of cloth lay at her feet next to a pile of denim. The desk is cluttered with cutout purple and yellow stars for the \$150 star quilts she makes, which take about two weeks to sew. Her sewing machine, the 52nd one she's owned, is decorated with little sticker-pictures of her grandchildren.

Fifteen years ago, Mary Agnes started her own sewing business. She made clothes for the community in exchange for whatever her neighbors could afford. But now Mary Agnes is too busy with the kids and usually only sews for them. Even when the children are in school, Mary Agnes doesn't get a moment alone. Every weekday she takes care of her 3-year-old nephew, Jasper James Quint Doney, whom she says has become like one of her own.

A couple of weeks before a powwow, Mary Agnes and her daughter, Faye Christian BlackCrow, sew non-stop to make elaborate detailed costumes. Faye holds a blue dress decorated with 150 folded tin jingles she made from chewing tobacco lids. It took her two days to make, she says.

Faye is a single mother who lives in Chinook because she wanted her 9-year-old daughter, Brenda, to get a better education off the reservation. She's an outreach coordinator for the Fort Belknap Tribal Court, and Mary Agnes' only daughter. She's also her confidante. Mary Agnes tells her daughter, Faye, the secrets no one else knows.

"She's my mom," Faye says, "but yet, she's also my best friend. If it wasn't for her, I don't think I'd be where I'm at right now because she's taught me a lot of things. All the things that I was taught by mom — respect, being a good listener, understanding — I'm forcing it more on my daughter."

Joseph walks in the front door wearing a plaid jacket with dark jeans and cowboy boots. Faye's car broke down the night before and her father spent the morning outside with his head under the hood, examining the engine.

"It was this thing here," he says, holding up a circular gadget for everyone to see.

He sits down, his hands black from an oily grime, and takes a deep breath. He doesn't say too much, mostly just listens. When he does pipe up every now and then, he speaks quietly, his voice sometimes getting lost beneath his wife's.



Mary Agnes BlackCrow mends Thorne's costume before a Nee-wah's Dance Troupe practice.

A recovering alcoholic, Joseph started jogging for exercise 20 years ago. He says he wants to run a marathon someday, but until then he's teaching his grandchildren how to bike, hike and run, he says.

"My husband wasn't really a family person when raising our kids," Mary Agnes says. "While raising our kids, I had done all the discipline and I kept my family together and kept my home together..."

"But now he's different with his grandkids," she says of her husband, whom she calls Fiddles. "He sits there and he talks with them and he tells them what to do and what not to do and how to handle themselves in public."

During the summer, Joseph works as a crew representative for the Bureau of Indian Affairs Forestry Department. He gets to be the first at the scene of a house fire, he says. It's his responsibility to turn off the electricity and call the ambulance crew to tell it what to expect.

The money Joseph makes in the summer supports the family all year long on a reservation where jobs are scarce. Seasonal unemployment is frequently at 70 percent. In addition to his income, the BlackCrows get outside help from Social Security, food stamps, and the Catholic Church, which donates clothing, turkeys for holiday dinners, toys, and necessities like shampoo and soap. They make do, says Mary Agnes, who buys most of her dishes and silverware at rummage sales.

"I always put my kids first, and my grandkids," Mary Agnes says. "Like I only have five or six changes of clothes and I'm fine with that."

The family is also enrolled in the Christian Children's Fund program, which provides sponsors for low-income families. Mary Agnes says the kids' sponsors from all over the country often send gifts and money.

Talita sits quietly on the living room floor, while Faye pulls her niece's hair back into a tight French braid. She does the same to Brenda, then it's off to dance practice at the school gym.

The license plate on Mary Agnes' van reads "Neewahs." It's the vehicle she takes to all the powwows and proudly drives around town. She pulls up to the school and everyone piles out, clutching little brown suitcases.

The only two windows in the stuffy gym let the light in from the outside. It's an old school gymnasium with gray wood paneling and peeling paint.

The children start their practice in a circle, shuffling their moccasins to the heavy beat of the Indian music. Their costumes are a vibrant yellow, orange, blue

and red.

Ashley is a fancy dancer, a performer whose moves resemble a butterfly's. Her shiny red hairpiece hangs far down her back and floats behind her as she takes long, delicate strides.

When the boys dance, the floor vibrates, making a small thunderous noise. Cameron wears an eagle-feathered bustle that's almost half his size and a white fox headpiece. The bells on his moccasins jingle as he stomps his feet loudly and stares straight ahead.

Thorne's outfit is a miniature version of Cameron's. He has hawk feathers on his bustle and

carefully mimics his older cousin. But the little boy with a sprinkling of freckles is much more of a silly kid than his focused cousin. He is playful and energetic and flashes a smile that shows two missing teeth.

The littlest one of the troupe, Talita, trails slowly behind and shuffles softly.

"Remember, Talita," Mary Agnes shouts over the music, "you gotta keep going, not just in one spot. Remember you got two feet."

The grandchildren practice their grand entrance and recite the Lord's prayer in Gros Ventre — something they do before every performance.

"I always put my kids first, and my grandkids, like I only have five or six changes of clothes and I'm fine with that."

— Mary Agnes BlackCrow

Bridgette and Brenda wear blue dresses with Copenhagen jingles. Brenda looks to the front, her mouth slightly ajar and her hands gripping her hips, while Bridgette does a heel, toe routine to the rhythm of the beats.

Mary Agnes sits at the front of the room and smiles.

"Ah, I get tired just watching them," she says with a laugh. "This is what I wanted for my birthday. To rent this place for two hours and watch them dance. I just love watching them."

Mary Agnes claps vigorously after each routine. She looks proud and content.

"Sometimes I think, they're growing up pretty fast," she says. "I think who's gonna take care of all my kids if I get sick?"

Mary Agnes takes a deep breath, removes her glasses and wipes her wet eyes.

"When I get done watching these kids I get so damn emotional," she says. "They're so good."

Reflecting on her life and all that she's endured, Mary Agnes says she has no regrets.

"Even when I'm just really tired, it doesn't bother me. It's all worth it, seeing the look on their face when I tell 'em I love 'em, and taking care of them. Still, when they accomplish something really great, I get emotional and cry."

Mary Agnes defines family as togetherness. She says it means taking care of each other through the ups and downs in life and always together in the end.

"We have to go through a lot of trials," Mary Agnes says, "and just keep living."



Talita BlackCrow sits patiently while her aunt Faye Christian BlackCrow French braids her hair before a practice session for the Nee-wah's Dance Troupe. Talita, the youngest of the grandchildren, plays a central role in the family. At 8 years old, Talita is eager to take on responsibility and is always asking Mary Agnes what she can do to help.



Mary Agnes BlackCrow poses proudly with six of her grandchildren, five of which she is raising. From bottom left: Talita, 8, Brenda, 9, Ashley, 15, Bridgette, 13, Cameron, 12, and Thorne, 9. Together the six cousins make up Nee-wah's Dance Troupe, traditional dancers who perform at powwows across the state of Montana.



Evelyn Old Elk, 89, stands proudly in the living room of her home in Crow Agency, glancing up at a wall where portraits of her 10 biological children hang in order from oldest to youngest. The painting on the wall behind her is a portrait of Evelyn as a young woman.

Clans, kin and culture

Next to Evelyn Old Elk's door is a photograph of her deceased husband's grandfather, Curley, a scout for General Custer.

Perched precariously on her television is the portrait of a grandson with the bounty from his first buffalo hunt. An orderly line of Marine portraits take up a row of a bookshelf and prom pictures take up another.

Nearly 50 family photographs decorate Evelyn Old Elk's living room. Throughout the home are hundreds of pictures of Evelyn's 229 descendents.

Ten of those pictures are Evelyn's special pride. The graduation photographs of her 10 children represent the core of Evelyn's family. She tells the stories of their successes and struggles from her spot on the sofa, but mostly she just enjoys the view.

"I like to sit here and watch them," the 89-year-old Evelyn says as she looks up at the photographs of her two daughters and eight sons and pats the "I Love Mom" pin

on her cardigan.

Her children are the spokes of her life and Evelyn is the hub that holds her family together.

The Old Elk family further radiates to include 84 grandchildren, or 87 "if you count some of the strays," her daughter Dora Rides Horse says.

Next come 103 great-grandchildren and 29 great-great grandchildren.

But Evelyn's family numbers more than her couple-hundred descendents.

Evelyn is an elder in the Whistling Water clan, one of 10 clans that define the 10,000 members of Montana's Crow tribe, the majority of whom live on 2.2 million acres south of Billings.

For the Crow Indians — unlike any other Montana tribe — clans are another measure of family and an important identifier in their culture.

Evelyn is a traditional woman and the Whistling



Eva Rides Horse, 4, and Manuel Rides Horse, 9, watch television with their grandmother, Dora Rides Horse, 67. Dora, the eldest daughter of Evelyn Old Elk, is raising the two youngsters whose parents, she says, are unable to provide for them.

Water clan, the largest Crow clan, plays a significant part in her life.

Evelyn lives with her son Andrew — he's the one sporting a cheeky grin in his graduation photograph — and his wife, Janet, and four children. Andrew recently returned from law school in Vermont. He studied environmental and tribal law and now works for the tribal chairman.

"When he went to law school, I said 'Take your family. Let them see the world,'" Evelyn says.

They returned to the reservation largely because of Evelyn. "We wanted our kids to know her," Janet says. "We wanted to be close to her."

The seams of the small house stretch to accommodate the seven people who live there and the relatives and friends who continuously drop by.

"This is how family gets this tight. We all live together," Evelyn says.

With Andrew and his son, Royce, at a powwow in Colorado, Evelyn jokingly wonders how she will get by until they return since the family won't let her cook anymore after several minor kitchen fires. Royce, 19, cooks her breakfast now.

"Royce is my right-hand man," she says. "He's gone so we're going to starve."

Evelyn remains a busy woman. She is home companion to ailing Crow elders, some of them younger than she, many of whom are members of her clan. In that

way, she stays connected to the world beyond her door and to her clan.

The Crow tribe is the only plains tribe with a clan system. The clans, "asham-maliaxxia" in Crow, are matrilineal, meaning that children belong to the clan of their mother and all adults in the clan are mothers and fathers to children in the clan.

"If you were in the Whistling Water, too, you would be my sister, and your children would be my children, and my children would be your children," Evelyn says.

The expanded sense of family is especially important in raising children. Evelyn herself was raised by a clan mother and the clans were influential in the raising of her own children. Crow custom says that parents do not discipline the child because that's the role of the father's clan. They discipline in part by teasing, which is meant to keep the child humble. That is balanced by the mother's clan, whose members praise and build self-esteem in a culture in which boasting about oneself is not permitted.

Crow custom says that the mother's clan fulfills emotional and physical needs,

while the father's clan promotes the status of their clan children.

"You rely on your father's clan for advice, guidance and prayers whenever you do something important," Evelyn's daughter-in-law Carlene Old Elk says. "The father's clan are the ones we have the greatest respect for. When we see one of our clan

uncles, we pay for their meal or give them a couple of dollars so they continue to remember us."

"If you were in the Whistling Water, too, you would be my sister, and your children would be my children, and my children would be your children."

Evelyn Old Elk

Most of the 10 clans have hundreds of members, which makes for a large family indeed. For Evelyn, the clan system is a way of life. Like breathing, it just is, she says.

Clans establish the social boundaries and provide a support system.

"The clan system is how we govern ourselves, how we respect one another," she says. "You won't be lonely and you will always have enough to eat."

Carlene Old Elk came to the Crow Reservation as a community development volunteer in the 1960s. She quickly learned the value of the clan system, and was adopted into the

Big Lodge clan.

"It's one of the things that has provided another level of strength for the families, for the people, for the tribe," Carlene says. "Through the clan system, you have another set of people concerned about you, another relationship. It's a real strength. I know it's a real strength."

"There's so many ways you get family. You are born into one, you have a clan, and there's adoption. Obtaining relatives is a lifelong process."

Evelyn's family includes more adopted children than she can count, including Sister Dorothy Kundračik, a Catholic nun, and Carlene, Evelyn's daughter-in-law.

Evelyn even adopted Lady Bird Johnson during the first lady's 1965 visit to the Crow Reservation. Evelyn gave her the Crow name "Mia iche-de-lushia alcekh dilcah" (Pretty Walking Lady) and has received Mother's Day cards from her for the past 37 years.

The first lady later invited Evelyn to a National Prayer Breakfast in New York City, where Evelyn got to see the Statue of Liberty.

When Evelyn adopted Sister Dorothy, at daughter Dora's request, for the ceremony the nun dressed in Indian clothing with a shawl and belt. She became part of the family during a Crow Fair celebration and was given the Indian name Woman Who Never Married.

Through traditions such as the annual Crow Fair, clan members pit their skills against rival clans and perform ceremonies learned from earlier generations. Evelyn's son Dan Old Elk, 62, was trained as a sun dance chief by his clan fathers and is passing that knowledge on to his Whistling Water clan children.

Dan's clan has helped him become what he is today, a member of the tribal legislature with an interesting past.

He first became involved in tribal government at the age of 23 after begging his grandfather to help him get elected.

"My grandfather had many friends and relatives and a lot of kids so he helped that way," he says. "He worked for the tribe before and he taught me how to campaign, how to talk to the elders."

After getting that taste of politics, Dan went to California. He says he stormed Alcatraz in the 1969-71 occupation of the island by groups of Indians and was in movies with Robert Redford and Raquel Welch. He owned a construction company that built houses until, he says, tribal politics bankrupted his business.

When he returned to his roots on the reservation, he asked his clan fathers to find something for him to do that involved working with children. His clan fathers came through for him, and Dan worked with abused and neglected kids. He also helped run a camp in Tucson, Ariz., where he tried to heal the pain of Los Angeles gang members, Idaho skinheads, and troubled teenagers from all over the world by incorporating Native American behavior and teachings like sweat lodges into their lives. "It's dark and safe so they can tell us things they've never said before, like about gang initiations," Dan says.

When he decided to try tribal government again, Dan asked his clan fathers if they thought it was feasible. They encouraged him to run and he won one of 18 legislative seats from among six tribal districts.

"If one of your clansmen is being elected for any office," Evelyn says, "you have to show your support. The one with the largest family wins elections."

Dan returns the favor. "Yes, I use my tribal position to help my clansmen," he says. "For example, whatever projects they want to work on, I help them with that."

Clan mothers and fathers are meant to be there for the everyday business of life. They pray for safe journeys. They discipline children and provide counseling.

"In modern society, you're taught to use clergy, counselors and teachers, but they don't fulfill the same role as clan uncles," Dan says. "When we know one of the kids has a problem, my brothers and I get together and we talk about what we can do."

"When you discipline your own kids you get angry, but when other family talks to kids, they aren't angry and they listen."

His sister, Dora, 67, agrees. "In olden days, parents were friends. They didn't discipline; the clan did that. About 60 per-

cent of people are still traditional and that's still going on," she says.

Clan mothers and fathers are also meant to be there for the high points and low points in life. They cut the cake at birthday parties and provide comfort at funerals.

"We grieve together. We're clannish. We support each other when we go through death and bad luck," Dan says.

A person's very name is a result of the clan system, for it is clan mothers and fathers who do the naming.

Dan tells his Indian name, "Takes-a-Bow," as he mimics drawing back a bow's string. The name was given to him by his clan fathers in honor of a clan father's brother. Naming such as this ties the clans closer together.

"They're like my children from then on," Dan says. "I remember them in prayers and sweats." He has named more than two dozen people from names he says came to him in dreams or visions.

It takes a clan to raise a child in the Crow culture and clanswoman Dora does her part. Like her mother Evelyn before her, Dora, 67, raised far more children than the five she gave birth to. Dora has raised about 45 children.

She describes herself as "child crazy." Dora may soon adopt Manuel, 9, and Eva,

4, who live with her now. As Dora, who works at Little Big Horn College, helps students get ready to take the high school equivalency test, Eva proudly prints her name on scrap paper: "EVA," or sometimes "VEA." She is a giggly girl Dora describes as "more than a handful at times." But never a burden.

"It's never caused any hardship. They've never been a bother, but my eyes get tired at the end of the day," she says.

Dora, a widow for the last 20 years, uses clan fathers to help fill in the male role for the children she has raised.

She doubts that Manuel and Eva will be the last children she adopts.

When Dora takes a spot next to her mother on the couch, the resemblance is striking, but there is a difference in their hands.

Evelyn's hands are wrinkled with time and bent by arthritis.

"See all those boys?" she says as she points a gnarled finger at the graduation pictures. "When they were growing up, I had to wash all their overalls on washboards. That's what I tell the little kids when they ask me why my fingers are crooked."

Time has left its mark on Evelyn, and Evelyn has left her mark on her family.

According to her children, two big val-

ues their mother stressed were the importance of education and neatness.

"Mom encouraged all of us to get an education," Dan explains. "She said, 'They can put you in jail. They can take everything away from you, but you still have your mind.'"

Dora, the first in her family to graduate from college, adds: "She was always being educated, more than other women her age, so she stressed that in her children."

Evelyn attended mission schools and military-style schools when she was growing up. From those she got an education and a passion for tidiness.

"She's a neat freak from all those years in the military-like schools. She passed on values from the ordered life of the schools," Dora says. "We used to call her the 'Commanding Officer, the C.O.' We always thought she didn't know, but later she said, 'And I always knew you called me the C.O.'"

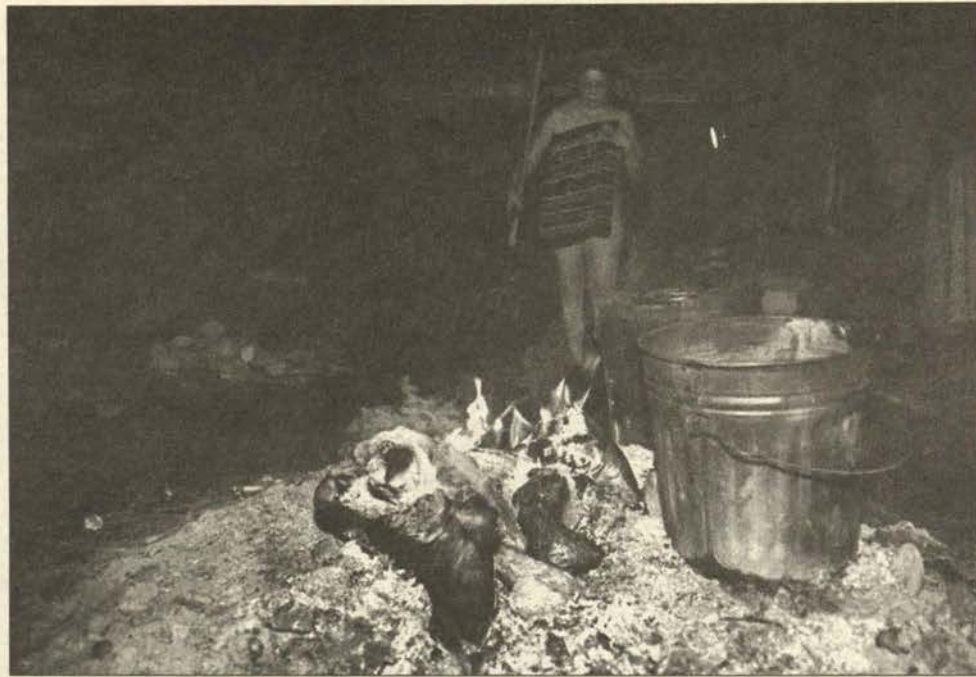
Evelyn is more of a softy when it comes to her children's children. They are her treasures.

For the Crow, wealth is not defined by dollars.

"I'm a wealthy woman," she says, "maybe not in terms of material goods, but definitely in family. That's why kinship ties are so strong."



Evelyn Old Elk, who works as a home companion to ailing Crow elders, returns to her house from an afternoon "visiting my clients," as she calls them. Evelyn has lived in this home for more than 20 years. She currently shares it with one of her sons, his wife and their four children.



Susan White Shirt emerges from a sweat lodge on her family's land outside Hardin to tend the fire and gather more smoldering rocks for another round of sweating. Susan and her aunts and sisters, who are still inside the lodge, are not biologically related to the Old Elk family, but share ties through the Whistling Water clan. The clan system is another way the Crow define family.

Clans extend family beyond blood

Clans, that is who we are. Our lives on this earth are tied to that.

Sharon Peregoy
Little Big Horn College professor

Yellow lights and a campfire glow are a beacon in the dark field seven miles from Hardin.

Inside the open shed, eight Crow women disrobe in the golden glow while another brings coals from the fire to the sweat lodge.

When enough coals are piled in the sweat lodge, the women crawl into the blanket-covered mound constructed out of willow by a licensed Crow man.

The women form a ring in the sweat lodge and lower the flap that acts as the door. The sweat lodge is plunged into complete blackness.

The woman next to the coals pours water on them, and the sweat begins. The smell of bear root hangs on the hot, wet air. Sweat splashes off the women as they slap themselves with straw switches to stimulate their nerve endings.

They pray and gossip in the Crow language. They are purified in body and spirit by the sweat.

They are women united by blood, custom and clanship.

Two women are of the Whistling Water clan. They are known by tradition as the great orators of the clan society — and its liars.

"We don't lie," one says in mock outrage. "We just exaggerate a lot."

The Crow call clans "ashammaliaxxia," which means "lodge where the wood intertwines." It is a reference to driftwood and

refers to the interwoven nature of the clans.

The next day in his office at the Little Big Horn College, Lanny Real Bird, an expert in the clan system, explains, "We are all floating down the same river, and we're united with others like ourselves."

As driftwood lodge together, so too do clan members cling together. Each individual is like a piece of driftwood, orientating by and depending on the others of the clan. The river is hazardous and without the group, the wood could be smashed by boulders in the river.

From clans come identity and personality. "They show how you fit into the greater picture, like the spokes on a wheel," Real Bird says. "Old Man Coyote, similar to an angel, developed the population to have characteristics the society would need in clan identity. They are like personality. We have the workers, the leaders, and the complainers."

The Whistling Water clan members are seen as generous and kind.

"They will give away everything they have. These types of personalities are seen as a blessing from Old Man Coyote," Real Bird says. The Whistling Waters also were granted license to boast or lie.

Real Bird is a member of the Big Lodge clan, which comes from his mother, for clans are matrilineal. He is a child of the Whistling Water clan, meaning that is his father's clan. Real Bird got his master's

and doctorate degrees because of the encouragement of his clan fathers.

The Whistling Water clan was originally known as Generous to Gophers, according to anthropologist Timothy McCleary. They were so generous that they would even leave food for gophers.

The name changed when a Generous to Gopher clansman fell in love with his clan sister, a taboo in Crow society. He flirted with her by whistling at her.

The Big Lodge clan is "the best, no dispute," says Fred Left Hand, a member of that clan.

The members of the Big Lodge clan are known as hefty people because they are always working. Lately, they also have been known for their leadership roles in Crow society.

"Since 1986 we have had the tribal councilmen. They can't unseat us," Left Hand says.

Good hunters come from the Greasy Mouth clan. They ate the fatty portions of their meat, rendering their mouths greasy.

Sore Lips clan members are willing to brave the elements. Old Man Coyote is said to have explained, "They do not care if it is a very cold winter or a very hot summer, they will go out and hunt. That is why their lips are wind burned."

The Bad War Deeds clan, formerly Hair Remaining on Lodge for their shoddy workmanship, were named Bad War

Deeds after a clan member lied about his battle prowess.

The Ties in a Bundle clan is characterized by haste, and the Brings Home Game Without Shooting clan members are thought of as intelligent — so smart they can hunt without weapons.

The Crop Eared Domesticated Animals were known for the quality of their livestock. The clan was renamed the Filth Eaters after a clan chief attacked his wife in a jealous rage and forced her to eat dung. Because of the negative connotations associated with this clan, only one man still claims membership. The others whose lineage derives from that clan now identify as members of the Ties in a Bundle clan.

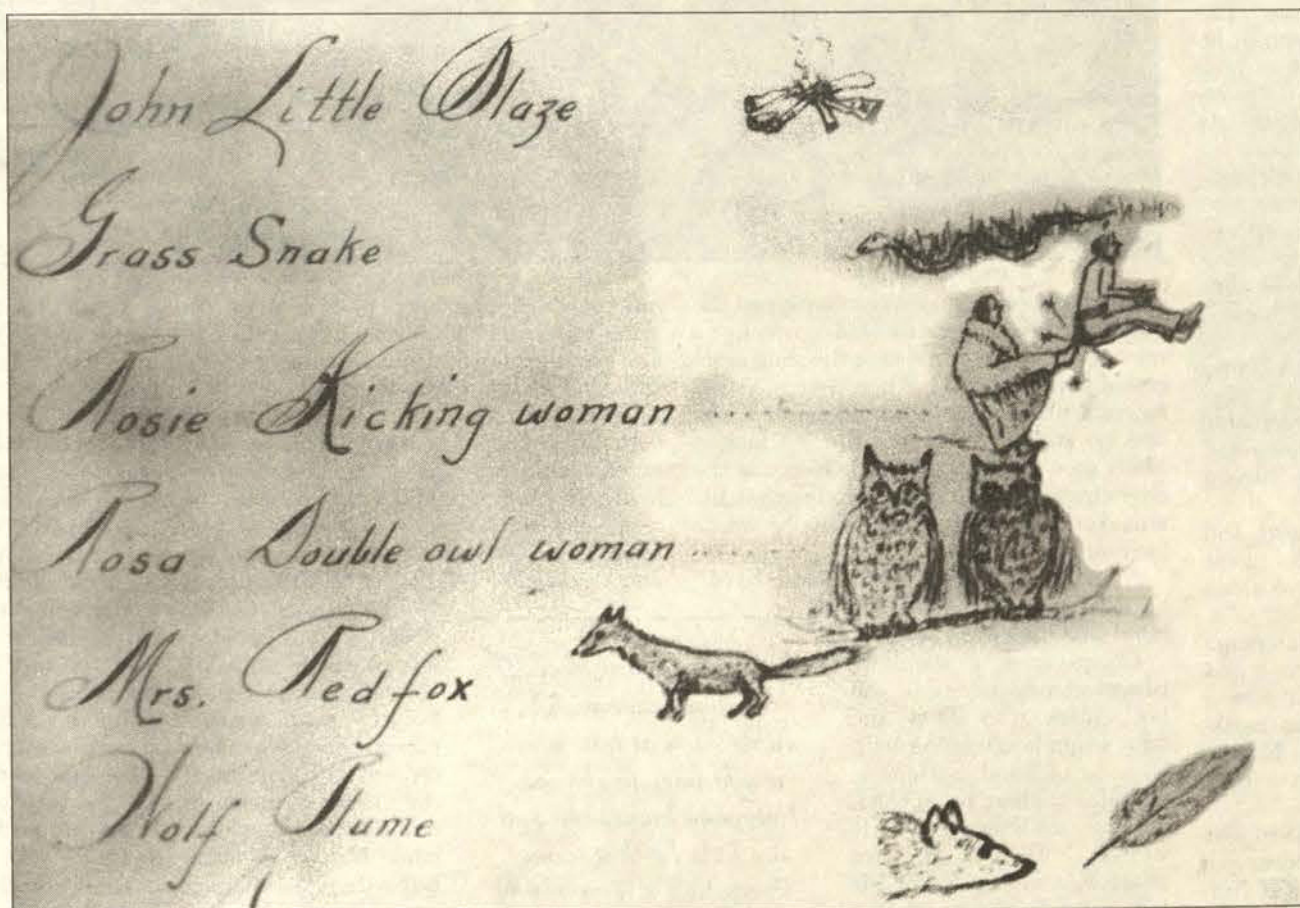
Treacherous tendencies and a fear of water characterize the Piegiens. The final clan was named the Newly Made Lodge because Old Man Coyote created them out of the people who remained.

Though there has been violence historically, modern clans tend to keep their rivalries confined to the basketball courts and June's Clan Day competition.

The clans themselves extend beyond those activities into the everyday lives of the Crow.

"Clans, that is who we are," says Little Big Horn College professor Sharon Peregoy. "Our lives on this earth are tied to that."

The Story Behind Family Names



Richard Sanderville, one of the first translators of the Blackfeet language, drew these name illustrations in the early 1900s.

Names signify our heritage and family links. But some Indian names were lost when agents mangled the translation.

Others became anglicized or were changed to avoid racial stigmas Indians often faced. Three Blackfeet Reservation families tell the history of their names.

Kicking Woman

An icy spring wind sweeps down the eastern Rocky Mountain front and whips across the plains of Browning, drifting snow high against the side of the bright blue home of George Kicking Woman.

Harsh spring conditions are not unusual on this 1.5 million-acre reservation located on the outskirts of Glacier National Park in northern Montana. While much of the country greets the birth of spring, often this reservation is still gripped by winter's icy grasp. The severe temperatures and winds equal the bounty of the region's beauty and as long as human history has been recorded here, the weather dictates how many events unfold.

The winter of 1911-1912 was no exception, when George Kicking Woman was born in a remote area north of Browning.

"My mother and father lived up in the woods," George says. "The snow was that deep," he explains as he holds his hand 3 feet from the floor.

It was in November, well after a brutal winter had tightened its grip. But it wasn't until April that his parents were able — or saw the need — to head to town and officially record his birth with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

George's parents spoke Blackfeet and very little English. They told the agent their new baby's name, a Blackfeet name that means Ran Down.

Many sounds in the Blackfeet language cannot be depicted in English letters, and through some mistake, their baby was given another name. George was registered as Kicking Woman, and his Nov. 6, 1911, birth date was recorded instead as April 2, 1912.

Many Indian names came to be in just that way. Earl Old Person, the contemporary chief of the Blackfeet tribe, was supposed to have the name Woman Shoe. Even the names of the tribes were changed by white men. The spellings of the Blackfeet bands within the tribe vary as often as the historians' attempts to record them.

Names have always held a sacred place in Blackfeet culture. And though George long ago resigned to accepting his agent-given name, he is a central figure in the naming ceremonies that have long been sacred to the tribe and to Indian families. In Indian custom a ceremonial name signifies more than ancestral identity. A name tells others about the named person's accomplishments in life or traits that they possess.

Each spring, after the first thunderstorm rumbles across the northern plains, George unwraps his Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle. For decades, George and his



George Kicking Woman and his granddaughter Lissa watch his grandson George try to fix the chain on his bike. He wants to make repairs so he can ride with his cousin Keyhn. Though the boys are cousins, they call each other brother.

wife, Molly, sat and slowly unwrapped the bundle. As each centuries-old-artifact was removed, George would sing the song associated with each one. When George would forget a phrase, Molly would remind him and he would continue. But no longer. Molly died in July 2000 and George is the only one left with the knowledge that his ancestors have been transferring by words for hundreds of years.

"Since my old lady left it's been hard," he says, motioning with his hand in a backwards sweep.

George grew up speaking Blackfeet and is one of the few elders who know the tribe's sign language as well. His use of hand motions is prevalent when he speaks, adding richness to his words. His hands are gnarled, and the tip of his left index finger is missing from an accident while working on a 1928 Ford pickup.

He talks about how much Molly knew about the tribal songs, ceremonies and dances, some of which no one knows now.

"She knows more than I do about the Indian way," George says, speaking as if she is with him still.

George is concerned about the loss of the language in Indian society and believes that is the cause of many of the problems his people face. His children all understand Blackfeet, as do many of their children.

"Our language sounds interesting when you talk," George says. "I wish we didn't have to have interpreters."

A good interpreter may have prevented the mistake with the Kicking Woman

name, which has been passed down to some of his 110 children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But George says it is too late to unravel the error.

"It's too late to change," George says. "If I would change my name, look at how much would have to change. Everyone knows me and my kids by that name."

As one of the oldest members of the tribe, he is a central figure in the cultural and traditional religion of the Blackfeet.

He is a person who people go to for advice, help or food. He says his Social Security card, driver's license and even his retirement papers from the Great Northern Railroad all bear the name Kicking Woman. But the ceremonial names that he has the authority to give seem more important to George. For a time, he and his wife were the only living persons in

the tribe on the Blackfeet Reservation to hold a medicine pipe bundle. Since the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act passed Congress in 1990, bundles that were in non-Indian hands are coming back into tribal possession.

Although it has been nearly two years since Molly died from complications from high blood pressure, the heartache is evident on George's face when he speaks about her. It's equally evident when he talks about the accident in October 1993 that took the life of his youngest son, Leland. George had planned to transfer the authority of his bundle to Leland, but he was killed in a logging accident.

It's too late to change. If I would change my name, look at how much would have to change.

Everyone knows me and my kids by that name.

George Kicking Woman, who was given the wrong name at birth by the BIA.

It was his first day on the job and the foreman was showing Leland and another man how to fell a tree. When the two men realized that a wind gust had swung the tree in their direction, Leland pushed the other man to safety. But Leland was hit and the spinal cord injuries he suffered resulted in his death nine months later.

Another of George's sons, Clifford, has diabetes and doctors say he will not live to be as old as his father.

Consequently, Clifford says that one of his brothers-in-law will eventually take over the authority and responsibility for the bundle.

In the Kicking Woman living room stands a large bookshelf filled with pictures and trophies of family descendants. On the wall behind it are two large pictures of Leland and of Rita, George's daughter who died from diabetes. George has helped raise most of Leland's six children. Leland's ceremonial name — Long Time Otter — has been passed on to one of George's grandsons, 3-year-old Kehyn. One of Leland's daughters, 17-year-old Lissa, is still being raised by George and lives with him, as does Kehyn. Her given name is Yellow Star Woman, which came from her grandmother.

"He's really a caring person," Lissa says, "and he's always been there for us."

George has been a father for many of his extended family members, stepping in when others would not or could not. As Lissa prepares for the birth of her second child, she knows she and her children are in good hands. George says he worries about what will happen to Blackfeet culture and language, but his family's well-being is what concerns him most right now.

"If you're real close to your kids," George says, "that's the important thing."

Rides At the Door

Smokey Rides At The Door spent the first 18 years of his life as Smokey Doore. Now he uses both his given name and its shorter version. He says his full name causes difficulties in a world unfamiliar with the rich tradition of Indian names. Computers often shorten it to something awkward and his mail often has a mangled version of his surname.

While Smokey says it's not the case in his family, it is not uncommon for some Indian families to have shortened or altered their descriptive last names to avoid the ridicule and racism they say their name so often sparks.

Smokey still signs legal documents as Doore, so the English name remains with him today. But the family name Rides At The Door has an origin generations of his family continue to recount with pride.

The name was bestowed upon Smokey's great-grandfather. He was given it sometime in the 19th century for his accomplishments during war party raids.

Rides At The Door was renowned for organizing horse stealing raids against Crow, Cree and Cheyenne tribes. This was considered a great accomplishment by the tribe and those who were good at it were revered. Rides At The Door and others in Blackfeet war parties would travel hundreds of miles on foot and find other tribes' camps to raid. The rival chief's tepee was usually in the middle of the camp and his horses would be tied nearby. Rides At The Door would ride past the enemy chief's tepee entrance with a stolen horse and try to touch him as he rode out of camp, a practice known as counting coup.

"The intent was to strike or touch," Smokey says, "not to kill."

Smokey says sometimes the warriors cut off an enemy's hair, but scalping was not the practice, contrary to what many Hollywood movies portray. During one of these raids, Rides At The Door and his partner became separated when escaping. His partner made it back to the Blackfeet camp, but Rides At The Door was not seen for weeks and the tribe assumed he was dead. Later, they learned that as Rides At The Door rode up a riverbed to escape, the horse he had stolen got away from him and he had to flee on foot. The enemy tribe sent a party to find and kill him. As they closed in, Rides At The Door hid in bushes.

"Then an animal, a deer or a rabbit, ran out of the brush," Smokey says. "The war party assumed that he had great powers and could change shape. They decided that he was so powerful that he would kill



Working on crafts in their living room occupies, from left, Darnell, Smokey and Mistee Rides At The Door on a spring Saturday morning. Smokey helps Darnell ready eagle feathers to put on the caps of some of Mistee's fellow schoolmates for their high school graduation, while Mistee beads pen coverings. The photos on the wall are of Smokey and Darnell's five children: Cheryl, Rolanda, Robert, Ellie and Mistee. Pictures of grandchildren are beneath photos of their parents.

them if they caught him, so they quit pursuing him."

Rides At The Door eventually made the long journey back home on foot and it was then that he was given his ceremonial name.

"When he eluded them," Smokey's wife, Darnell, says, "the question was, and still is, was he a shape shifter? That's the secret they still haven't found out yet."

A picture of his great-grandfather hangs in Smokey's office, along with those of other historic Blackfeet figures. Rides At The Door has a penetrating fierce countenance that suggests he had little fear of anyone or anything. And Smokey and Darnell say their family is continuing to practice counting coup, but in different ways.

"Instead of stealing horses," Darnell says, "we're stealing equality. We have different warriors now days."

Smokey says a name, whether a last name, or a given name, helps Indians find an identity. But he warns that the subject of names is a delicate one, because so many names were changed, or not translated correctly when Indian agents began forcing Indians to be registered.

"There were some beautiful names lost in translation," Smokey says. "If the guy translating didn't know the English name, it was changed. That's a crime."

He and Darnell are also bundle holders, having received a bundle from a museum

as part of the repatriation act and given the authority to open it by George Kicking Woman. The Rides At The Doors received their bundle after three days of ceremonies. Smokey and Darnell emphasize that they are equals when it comes to responsibilities associated with the bundle.

"There must be male and female to have a balance," Darnell says. "That has always been the balance of Indian teaching."

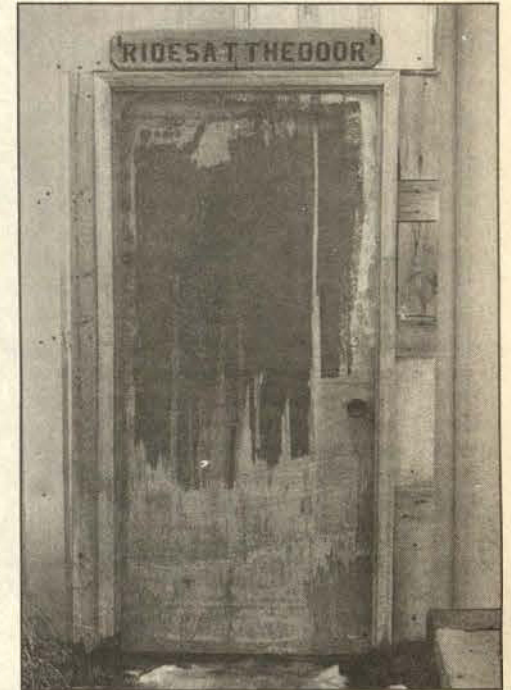
Smokey and Darnell say they have named about 200 people since they took responsibility for the bundle six years ago.

"It's a social gathering," Smokey says. "The name is stamped or sealed and should be used from then on when people pray for them. We talk about why and how the name came about and what the reasons are for giving them."

When a family approaches the Rides At The Doors, they sometimes have a name picked out that they want to give to a person in their family. Or sometimes, they don't have any idea, and they ask them for help. Darnell says they will often find a suitable name through visions or dreams. They say they are careful to avoid duplication, because only one living person in the tribe should possess a ceremonial name at any given time.

In their own family, Darnell's grandmother, Mary Ground, named all of their five children. Ground was a central figure in Blackfeet history, who lived anywhere from 108 to 114 years. She lived with Smokey and Darnell periodically from 1975 to 1988.

Mistee, their youngest daughter, was



The Rides At The Door family displays their name above the door to a storage shed at their house. They explain that since they have used the full length of their name, Rides At The Door, instead of the shortened version, Doore, they have come across many mispronunciations and spellings of their name. Often they get mail processed by a computer, that lists their name as "Rides At The Do."

named Pretty Woman by Mary Ground. Ellie, one of her older sisters, is called Spring Woman, which was the warrior Rides At The Door's wife's name. Mary not only named their children, but she passed on many of the traditions and the knowledge that allowed them to assume the responsibilities of being bundle holders.

"We were being prepared for something that was meant to be without us knowing it," Darnell says. "We did not accept or reject it."

Darnell says that her great-grandmother began teaching her songs and dances when Darnell was very young. Sometimes Indian children would receive an item from their elders, who would simply tell them, you might need this someday, she says. The teachings continued throughout her's and Smokey's lives, sometimes without them fully understanding their importance. But later on in life, they understood.

"They said it's up to you to continue the teachings," Darnell says. "The door was open. That's what happened to us."



Rena Heavy Runner sews a ribbon shirt on a quiet Sunday afternoon. The importance of family for the Heavy Runners can be seen in the many photos of children and grandchildren that decorate a desktop in the living room. The annual spring Heavy Runner reunion, says George, is "big."

Heavy Runner

Some last names on the Blackfeet Reservation belong only to a few. The name Heavy Runner is not one of them. Hundreds of people bear the name of this famous Blackfeet chief. But where did the name come from?

"One story is the name was taken from a mountain lion leaving heavy imprints in the snow," George Heavy Runner says.

Another belief is that long ago, a Blackfeet war party encountered some Crow Indians and were all slaughtered, except for one young boy. He then ran back to Blackfeet territory with a heavy pack on his back. Because Blackfeet tradition and history is oral, the true story behind the name will probably never be certain. But, according to George, that does not diminish its significance.

"We're very proud of our name," George says, "and who we are."

George says his family has been holding reunions every spring for

more than 20 years. His father, Jack, is the patriarch and he and other elders in the family preside over the gathering.

"The strength in that is those older people up front," says George, a former Montana legislator. "Who knows, maybe I will be up there one day."

At the reunions, and at other times, elders pass down the family's oral history and as the elders pass away, the younger generation takes over and the cycle keeps repeating. More than 100 descendants usually attend the summer gatherings. All children born in the last year are introduced and the family is updated on what is going on in each other's lives.

"I'm very fortunate to be a part of a family that embraces and recognizes the importance of family," George says. "In no uncertain terms, family is so important to us." Ceremonial names also play a

part in the Heavy Runner family. George was given the name Big Person by his grandmother Mary Ground. His wife, Rena, who is half Navajo and half Blackfeet, was given the name Different Tribes Woman by her grandmother. His son, George Jr., was given the name

Holy Badger by Blackfeet chief Earl Old Person. The name was taken from George's grandfather, and as is custom with many Blackfeet, is a way of preserving the memory of someone who has died. George says he asked his father's permission, then Old Person's, before the public ceremony where George Jr. was named when he was 5 years old.

"It was very important for his remembrance," George says. "It's very strong in our family to do those types of things."

George's daughter Carissa and Michael West Wolf have an 18-month-old daughter, Mika. His

family is discussing what ceremonial name to give her. George says the name will likely be one her ancestors had. But he says another event may guide the Heavy Runners. Mika was born on Sept. 11, 2000, and the family celebrated her first birthday on one of America's darkest days.

"It was a good day," George says, "but also a sad day."

Like George Kicking Woman and the Rides At The Doors, George says he is concerned with the decline of some traditions and the transfer of cultural ways from generation to generation. He cites poverty as one of the main reasons for modern Indians not keeping the traditions alive.

"It's hard to find the time to learn the old ways and find out about your past when you are just trying to find a way to eat," George says.

But by staying close to his extended family and passing on traditions, George says he knows his name will serve as one way to keep his family together.

"It is important for us to still have our identity," he says.

"I'm very fortunate to be a part of a family that embraces and recognizes the importance of family. In no uncertain terms, family is so important to us."

George Heavy Runner

Unplanned blessings

Native families embrace the birth of a child as a blessing, planned or not. For Javon Montes, family support and acceptance has allowed her to achieve her dreams while raising twin boys.

“Children are a blessing. I don’t think anyone thinks that they are ever bad. People may not like it if their young daughter gets pregnant, but you do what you can do.”

Marilyn Sutherland, social worker

When Javon Montes found out she was pregnant with twins at age 19 she had nowhere to turn but to her parents.

Although James and Lydia Montes’ home in Box Elder on Montana’s Rocky Boy’s Reservation was already full with Javon and three younger siblings, they didn’t hesitate to add two more infants to the household.

Identical twins Jeremiah and Stephon came to a home already shared by an infant cousin, born to Javon’s sister LeAnn just a month before Javon realized she was pregnant.

James and Lydia Montes were not happy that their teenage daughters found themselves single mothers. But they make it clear immediately that they would help in whatever ways they could.

“I just assured her that I would support her and that I loved her, and I trusted that gave her a peace of mind,” Lydia Montes says.

The birth rate for Native American women ages 15 through 19 in Montana is more than three times that of white teenagers in the state.

And while parents and health educators say teen pregnancies are certainly not encouraged, they emphasize that in Indian families all children are welcome children. Often grandparents play a major role in these extended families.

Indians consider all life “a borrowed gift from God,” says Pauline Standing Rock, a bilingual Head Start teacher in Box Elder. Regardless of the situation, families give all the support and love they can, and that extends to teen pregnancies, she says.

Marilyn Sutherland, a social worker at Rocky Boy’s since 1975, says she has seen a change in attitudes toward young mothers.

“Children are a blessing,” she says. “I don’t think anyone thinks that they are ever bad. People may not like it if their young daughter gets pregnant, but you do what you can do.”

What’s more, if a mother finds herself too overwhelmed to properly raise a



On the Montes family entertainment center is a religious plaque and a photograph of the three Montes grandchildren, Stephon, Jeremiah and Dominique. Family members say their spiritual grounding and close ties give each other strength.



Stephon, left, and Jeremiah Montes, both 4, play with toy frogs and lizards their mother, Javon, put into their Easter baskets.

Story By: RAMEY CORN

University of Montana School of Journalism

Photographs By: OLIVIA NISBET

child, relatives are almost always willing to step in.

"In all my years that I've worked here, as long as you know they're your blood, you're gonna do whatever you can to keep them," Sutherland explains.

Indeed, abortion is far less frequent among pregnant Indian teens than among their white counterparts. For every seven births to Indian teenage mothers in Montana, there is one reported abortion. For white teens in the state, however, the ratio is close to

one abortion for every two live births.

And adoptions — influenced in some measure by the Indian Child Welfare Act, which gives strong preferences to Indian adoptive families when Indian children are involved — are usually to relatives of the child.

Javon never thought of giving up her boys because she knew she would have her parents to lean on.

She lived with them for a year after the twins were born and, with their encouragement and support, returned

to Stone Child College at Rocky Boy's Agency, where she had already completed her first year, to finish an associate of arts degree.

Today Javon is married to Ivan, the father of the twins, and working toward a degree in English at the University of Montana. Without the aid of her parents Javon's return to school would have been impossible. Her parents watched the boys when she attended class and helped her in ways big and small. Their assistance was both emotional and

financial. For example, they had her retire her two-door pickup and gave her their new four-door Mazda. In Missoula she also finds support from sisters LeAnn, a Lady Griz basketball player who is married and raising 4-year-old Dominique, and from Aimee, a freshman at UM who also plays basketball.

Javon, Ivan and the rambunctious identical twins recently moved from married student housing to an apartment in Missoula's South Hills near where LeAnn lives.

She says her relationship with her sisters has helped her succeed where others faced with the same circumstances have floundered.

LeAnn and Javon depend on one another for help with their kids. "We're definitely each other's babysitters," LeAnn says.

During the basketball season Javon often takes care of Dominique during practice. When the games take LeAnn away for several days, Dominique frequently stays with Javon. Although LeAnn is married, her husband attends UM and also works, so knowing Javon can watch Dominique eases her parents' minds.

"Always having to depend on each other, it's made us build a stronger relationship towards one another," LeAnn says.

The sisters spend as much shared time as they can and always try to cook a big family meal together once a week. And their getaways to Wal-Mart let them feel like college students combing for bargains more than mothers trying to juggle many balls.

The Montes family has always pulled together. The success of having two daughters play college ball is one measure. And for every home game, James and Lydia pile Colton, Jamie and, frequently, the children's grandmother into a car for the five-hour drive to Missoula. The family's Flathead-area relatives also make the trip. At the motel grandpa James likes to frolic in the pool with Jeremiah and Stephon under his arms and Dominique on his back.

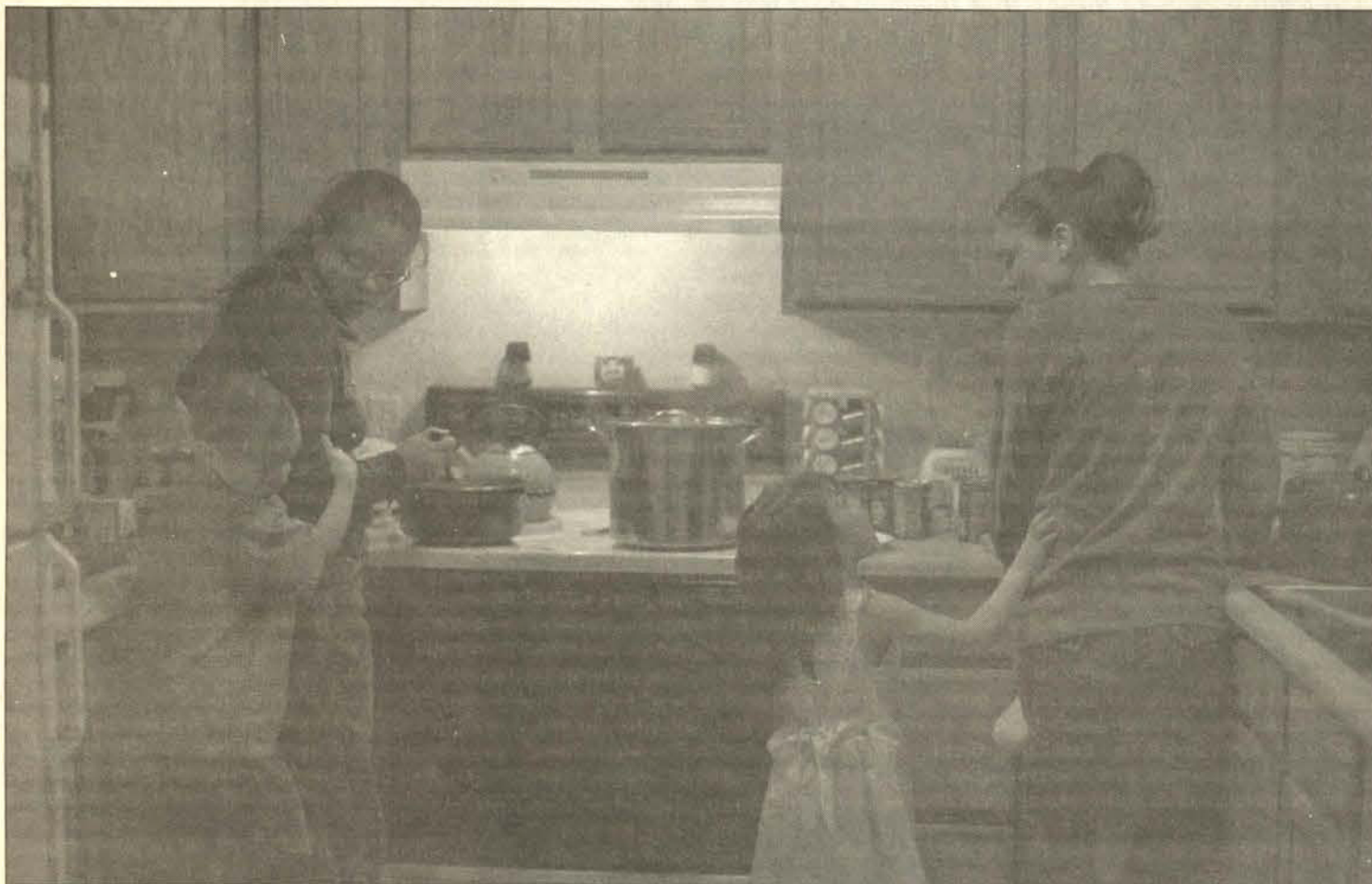
Yet, despite all the support that Javon receives from family, revealing her pregnancy was emotionally taxing.

"I wasn't exactly scared of my mom's wrath coming down on me, it was more like I'd be a disappointment to my parents," Javon says.

Her father had always encouraged her to do her best, be it on the basketball court or in the classroom. But like his wife he accepted the fact calmly and helped his daughter prepare for the birth in whatever ways he could.

Nearly half the children born in Hill County, which includes Havre, the Rocky Boy's Reservation and a half-dozen small towns along U.S. Highway 2, were born to unwed mothers, according to 2000 census figures.

So while the birthrate for Native



Javon, left, and her sister LeAnn cook Easter dinner and attempt to chat with each other while their children try to grab their attention.



Javon takes a break from her Spanish homework to hug and kiss her son Jeremiah. Montes says Jeremiah is the more affectionate of the twins in the morning and he will usually come and hug and kiss her first thing when he wakes.



Lydia Montes, left, laughs as her daughters Javon, center, and Aimee, sift through their father's collection of vinyl records for Aimee to listen to for her history of rock-n-roll class at the University of Montana. Three Montes daughters attend the Missoula school.

American females is higher than that for whites, it's obvious the fact many unmarried women are having children is not an Indian phenomenon. However, some Indian health educators say one reason for the high birth rate is that contraception is not in keeping with old customs. But neither, they say, were children out of marriage.

"In the old days you couldn't have a child out of wedlock; it was taboo," says Alberta St. Pierre, a nurse who has worked at Rocky Boy's Indian Family Health Clinic for 25 years. But that taboo didn't mean Indians embraced modern methods of contraception.

"The less Indian you are the more likely it is that you will use contraception," St. Pierre says.

Javon says she wrestled with her religious beliefs before she got pregnant.

"I wanted to get on birth control, but it was more a moral issue," she explains.

"I wanted to get on it because I didn't want to get pregnant, but I knew it wasn't right, that I shouldn't be having sex at all, but while I was in the middle of all that I got pregnant."

Even with her parents' emotional support when they learned of her pregnancy, Javon says she lost a lot of self-esteem and confidence.

"I was really scared to get back out there," she recalls. "I wondered, how will I do this, how will I face my classmates?"

But she made herself meet the challenge. She made herself be strong.

"When the boys were born, just seeing their faces and hearing them cry, it was like nothing I've ever experienced before," Javon says.

"The fact (was) that I wasn't only living for myself anymore, and taking care of just my needs, doing what I wanted to do, now I had two little guys that

depend on me more than anything else."

And taking the step to register for school helped her regain her confidence.

"It was like a light bulb lit up," her mother says. "I could see a whole different her and I was really happy."

Not long after, Javon was ready to move to Missoula with her boys to enroll at UM, but even with the progress she had made, life as a university student with twin sons is not easy. Though LeAnn was there to help, Javon was a single mother and getting everything done was exhausting.

Now with Ivan's help her routine is a little less hectic.

She starts her day by reading scriptures, praying and writing in her journal. When she and Ivan rouse the boys, the twins pull the covers over their heads and dig in, but their protests don't last long. They pull matching tees and hooded sweatshirts over their heads and their dark, buzz-cut hair pops through first, framing soft, brown eyes. The boys look identical but Javon says they don't act the same. Stephon is the bigger of the two, and Javon calls him the daddy's boy. Jeremiah is smaller and constantly

gives Javon hugs and kisses and tells her that he loves her.

Religious faith is strong in the Montes family. They use scriptures as a guide and their Pentecostal beliefs are their anchor. Lydia Montes also taught Sunday school at the Assembly of God on Rocky Boy's Reservation for 12 years.

"I always encouraged the girls to trust in Him," Lydia says.

Javon says she focused on spirituality to overcome her depression after finding she was pregnant.

"You find yourself stuck in the worst situation and you don't know where to turn, and the only way you can turn is spiritually, and within yourself," Javon says. "That's what I did, I checked myself spiritually and said, 'OK, where am I going now?'"

Still today Javon calls Lydia when she feels she needs spiritual guidance and they look up scriptures over the phone.

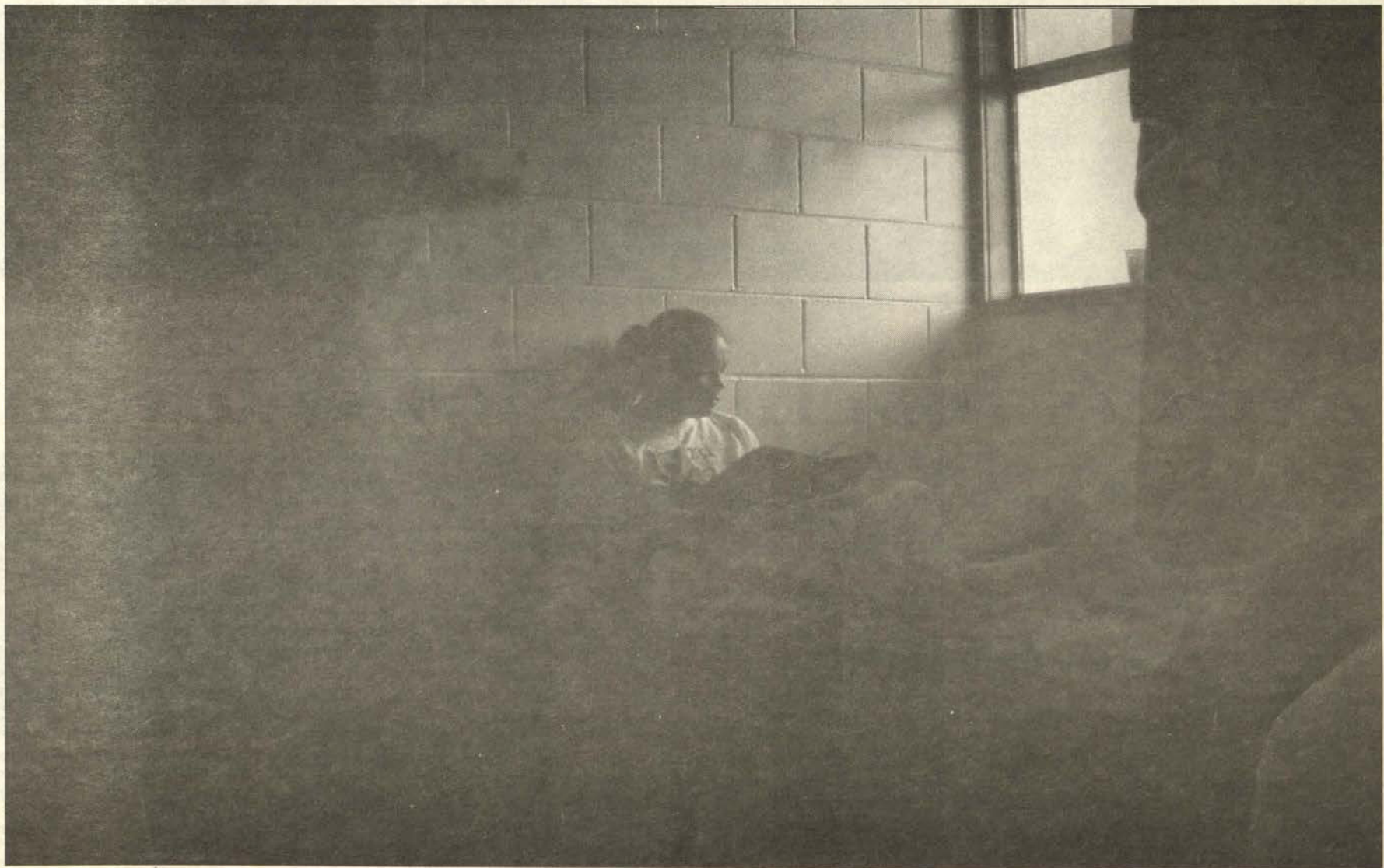
It's that support and love that allows Javon to succeed.

"I know that if I wasn't in the family that I'm in and the support and love ... I don't know where I'd be," she says.

You find yourself stuck in the worst situation and you don't know where to turn, and the only way you can turn is spiritually, and within yourself.

Javon Montes, " "

mother of twin boys



Javon spends some solitary time reading scriptures from a Bible her mother gave her. By getting up early every morning, Javon is able to reserve some time for herself before her family awakens.



Andrea Adams and her sister, Brenda Morton, embrace amidst the kitchen commotion. Every month at least 25 members of the Adams family come together to celebrate birthdays or other occasions and to just stay in touch.

Tragedy's teachings, love's lessons

Standing on the deck of his home, Louis Adams looks out over his land with a smile on his face.

Louis lives just outside Arlee on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana. A few miles east, the Mission Mountains' jagged snowy peaks jut into the sky, cutting a sharp line in the horizon. A lone horse dances in the snow-covered field that extends west to the surrounding foothills. Louis' gravel driveway extends a good half-mile before it joins the nearest road. He owns more than 400 acres of some of Montana's most scenic landscape.

Louis is proud of his property, but he calls it his children's land and points to a trailer that is home to a son, and to houses where his daughters live. His wife Nadine is also buried here. From his deck he can

oversee it all. It gives him comfort to have family near.

At 68, Louis is the father of 8, grandfather of 30 and great-grandfather of 11. This is the big family Louis always wanted.

Like many Indian families, the Adams family's ties to their reservation land have kept family members close and that physical proximity fosters an emotional bond that keeps the family strong.

Louis is a full-blood Salish who served on the Flathead tribal council for 28 years, combining that work with a 35-year career in forestry. He is looked to on the reservation as a keeper of the culture and has a degree in cultural preservation from Salish Kootenai College. The tribal council has honored him several times for his work in cultural preservation and he is an elder

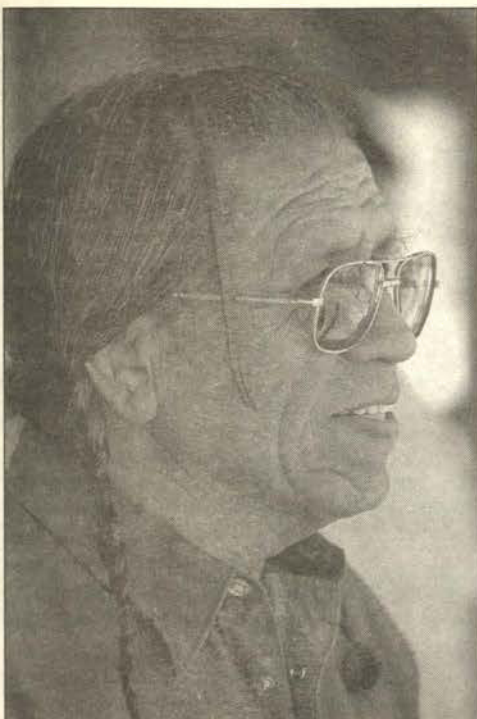
who is revered as someone who bestows traditional names on Flathead Reservation children.

His children and grandchildren do their best to follow in his footsteps. Daughter Arleen was one of the first people to earn a degree in Native American studies at the University of Montana. She has taught both Salish and Kootenai languages at Salish Kootenai College and has won service awards from the Polson school district. Other children and grandchildren have achieved academically, and all are committed to their culture. The family's frequent gatherings, like a recent one at Louis' house, give them the opportunity to celebrate their achievements.

Inside his house, Louis' children chat with each other, his grandchildren scurry



Andrea Adams and Angela Pierre hold hands in a St. Patrick Hospital waiting room during an operation on Andrea's son, Brendan. In February, after Brendan was in a car wreck, the doctors found a congenital spinal problem that required surgery this spring.



Louis Adams, a full-blood Salish, looks out over his land at family members sledding down a hill after a spring snowstorm.

from one room to the next and his great-grandchildren fuss and fumble in the living room. The house is alive with activity, as it is at least once a month.

The Adamses have been coming together one Sunday every month for decades. They gather to celebrate the birthdays that fall during that month. They eat, play and laugh the day away. It is most often a time of celebration and for seeking counsel but it has also been a time for consolation.

This Sunday, they're celebrating the birthdays of Arleen, Maxine, Payton and Dia and, as usual, four generations of the Adams family are present. Almost 50 Adamses, of all ages and sizes, shuffle around the house. In the kitchen, women prepare everything from hamburgers to potato salad. The wet socks, sweatshirts and pants of the kids who've been playing in the snow all morning hang from the wood stove. Several folding tables are set up in the middle of the kitchen displaying the two dozen or so dishes that have been prepared. Traditional Indian headwear hangs from the walls, next to the pictures of Adams family gatherings of the past. Little room is left on any of the walls.

In the living room the men sink into couches and talk, clutching coffee cups. Their conversations about work, school and family are frequently interrupted by children who run about the living room, feet stomping and voices screaming. Some sit just inches from the television, others wrestle and roll around, thumping each other on the floor and against the walls. Kids constantly run in and out of the house, cold air rushes in, the door slams and their wet feet squeak on the kitchen floor. The laughter and chatter never ceases and the roar in the room continually increases.

"It's usually like this every time we gather," Louis jokes. "Sometimes it's noisy."

"I don't want to see my cousins die from alcohol and drugs, just as I don't want to see my brothers and sisters die."

Myrna DuMontier,
Louis Adams' daughter

But at close to 3 p.m. even the little ones are silenced. As he does every time his family comes together, Louis begins the gathering with a prayer and a few words of wisdom. His simple words instantly command the attention of all without the slightest raise of his voice.

"When you talk, share what's in your heart, because that's what our gatherings are for," he says.

Louis' eyes circle the room and slowly his children begin to talk.

His son Jason speaks up first.

"Again we're blessed with the privilege to gather as a family, as we always are," he says.

As he speaks he pulls his wife closer, glances over at his son and at times his voice wavers.

"I don't do the right things a lot of the times for my wife and for my kids," he says.

He doesn't elaborate, but the nods from his sisters, brothers and Louis show an unspoken understanding.

Myrna, Louis daughter, isn't as vague. She asks for God's forgiveness for her actions as tears run down her face. She begins to speak, pauses and then begins to speak again.

"I don't want to see my cousins die from alcohol and drugs, just as I don't want to see my brothers and sisters die," she says.

A room that just minutes ago was filled with laughter is now filled with only the snuffle of noses and sighs of sadness.

At the close of the family's reflections, Louis comments: "When I look around and I see my kids — there's been times when I've visited my kids who have been in a bad way. That's happened several times."

The little ones begin to fidget, but the older generations, those Adamses who have been through the tough times, sit and listen respectfully. They know what their sisters and brothers have faced. Louis knows better than any because he's been through it all with them. But he also knows the young Adams family members are still somewhat naive to the tragedies the older generations have seen.

"Someday they'll know what I'm talking about," Louis says.

One of the tragedies Louis is talking about occurred 18 years ago when Louis' daughter Arleen was in a car accident. She was drunk and driving from Mission to Ronan, when she drove off the road, into a culvert and rolled her truck.

"Man, when I saw her pickup the next day I don't know how she lived," Louis recalls. "I didn't even have hopes."

Years later Louis' son Ray was also in a car accident in the Mission Valley. Ray was also drinking when he hit another car head on and killed the other driver.

Then, just a few years ago, Leah and Geraline, both granddaughters of Louis, were on their way home late one night from a powwow in Billings. They were riding in the bed of a pickup when the driver fell asleep and rolled the truck. The girls survived, but the close friend who was the driver died.

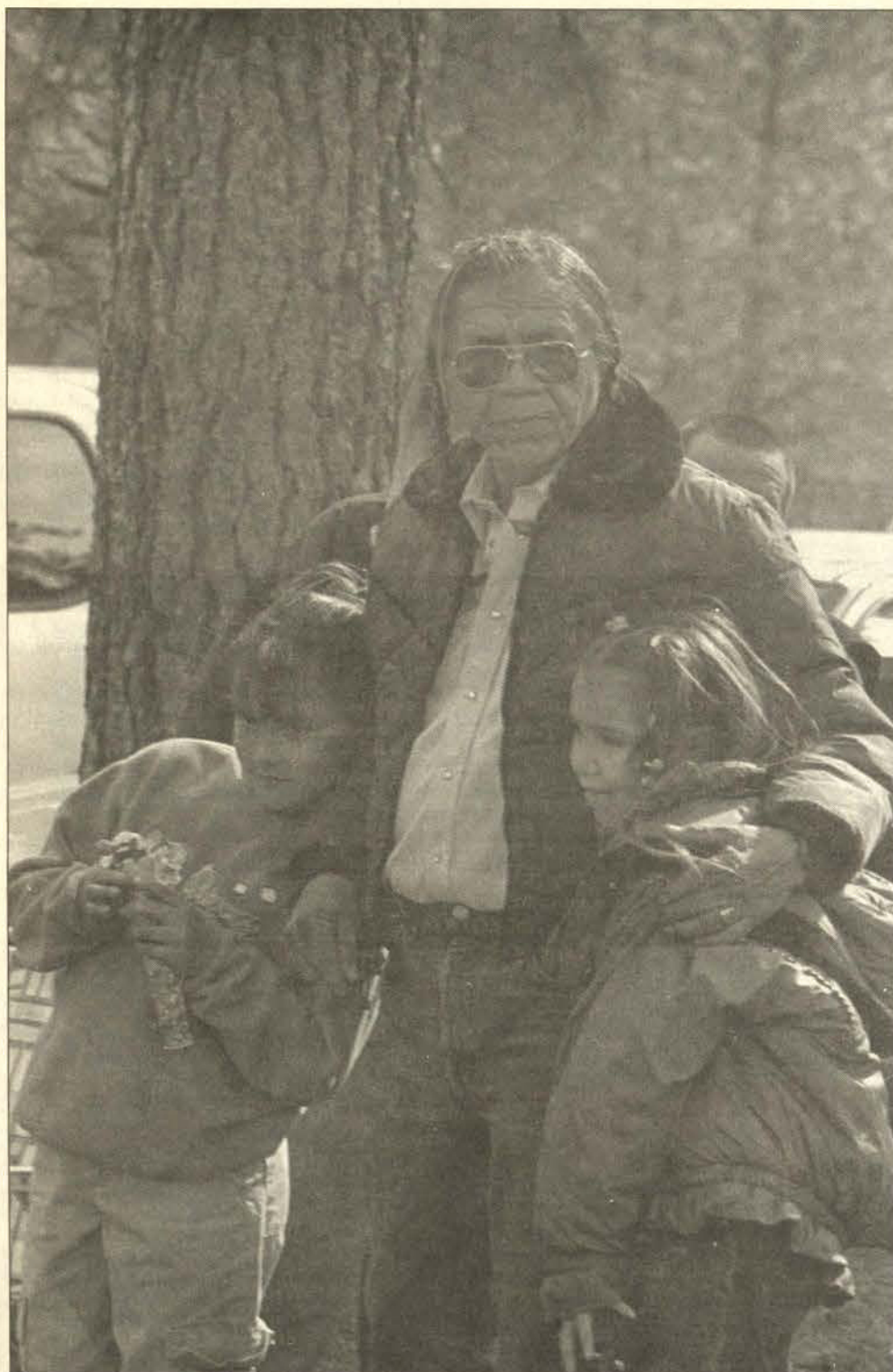
And just over a year ago, a son of Maxine's, Louis' daughter, was shot seven times. He survived, but his recovery was slow and he ultimately lost the use of one arm.

Tragedy struck the Adamses most recently when Brendan, the oldest son of Louis' daughter Andrea, was in a car accident in February that left him in the hospital with doctors unsure about whether he would survive.

Brendan admits he had been drinking, but told him mom he flipped the car when he tried to pick up a dropped cigarette. He



Andrea Adams, left, family friend Angela Pierre, and Andrea's sister Brenda Morton laugh as oldest granddaughter Geraline Adams tells a humorous story in the hospital waiting room. "I can't even begin to know what it would be like to not have sisters," Andrea says later.



Clutching members of the family, Alianna Sherwood and Susette Rossback, Louie Adams pauses during a prayer circle at his family's Easter celebration. The prayer circle is a time for members of the family to share what is on their minds and in their hearts.

and others were thrown from the car.

At St. Patrick Hospital he was treated for a fractured pelvis and neck injuries. He and his two passengers were in critical condition for a time and the family didn't know if Brendan would survive.

"It was the scariest thing, driving from Mission to Missoula, not knowing what condition my son was in, whether he was going to be alive or not," Andrea recalls.

Andrea's family arrived and filled the hospital waiting room.

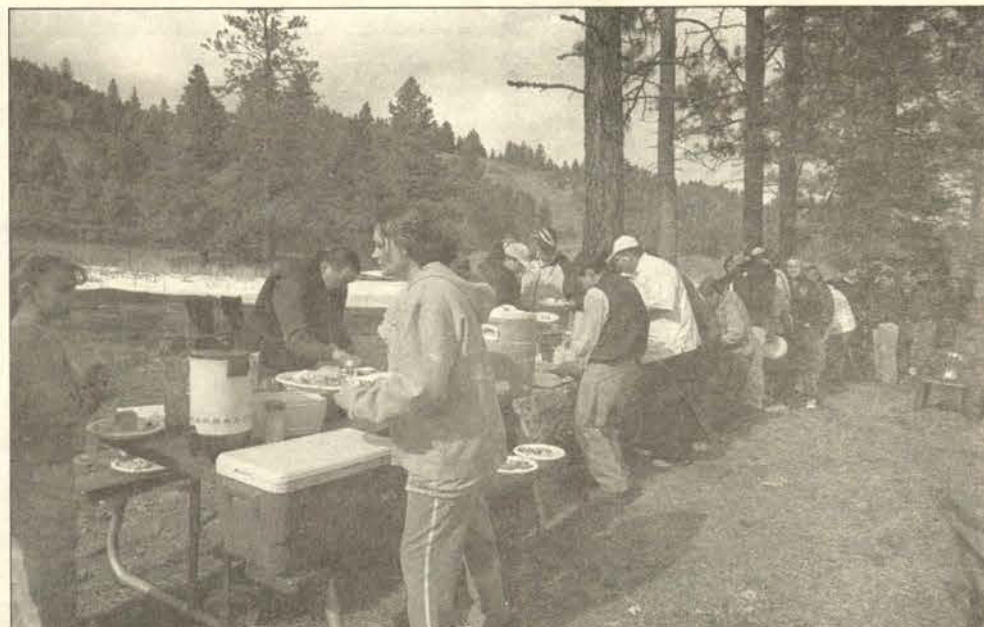
"Sometimes I think they get sick of seeing Indian families because they know it's not just one of them," jokes Louis' daughter Brenda.

In the Adams family, humor is as important as family in times of tragedy. In the hospital's waiting room, they joke constantly and laugh out loud. It is a way to try to deflect worry, not a sign of detachment from the crisis.

Brendan survived, but had to be hospitalized again in March for an operation to repair a spinal cord problem. This time family members filled a fifth floor waiting room.

For Andrea, who is a single mother, having her sisters, nieces, nephews and children there made a difference.

"It just feels good to know that you don't



"Easter is always a big day," says Louis. The celebration drew more than 40 family and friends to Firestone Flats outside of Arlee. The opening event is a prayer circle, followed by a huge feast of everything from turkey to fry bread. The rest of the day is filled with baseball games, Easter egg hunts and campfire conversations.

have to go through it alone," Andrea says. "If you need to rest there's someone there who will be awake and there with Brendan. It's always good to have a shoulder to cry on or a hand to hold when stuff like this goes on."

And when emotions have settled there's always a story to tell and a lesson to learn and teach.

At an Easter gathering, Ray cautions others not to make the mistakes he did. He served time in prison for the manslaughter charges brought as a result of his car accident.

"The things Ray's been through he doesn't want anyone to go through that," Louis says.

It's no short list, what the Adams family has endured. The tragedies extend back to Louis' childhood and have characterized much of the Adams family history.

Louis says he's trying to change the pattern.

"I've told my daughters the greatest battles you'll ever have is with yourself," Louis says. "I mean I was no angel, but if there's any way I can help them not go through these things, that's a plus." He hopes the gatherings will give the family strength and reinforce that alcohol is a danger. He says the family doesn't shy away from discussing personal troubles when they come together.

The younger generation believes so strongly in the importance of a family dynamic that they have started gatherings of their own.

On Sunday nights they get together at the home of Geraline, the oldest grandchild, for dinner. She cooks, they all catch

up and, as always, simply enjoy each other's company. The gatherings may be a bit more rowdy than the once-a-month extended family affairs, but the outcome is the same: reinforcing a strong sense of family.

On the Flathead Reservation and throughout Indian culture this type of family dynamic is not uncommon.

Lucy Vanderburg, director of the People's Center in Pablo, grew up with a family much like the Adamses and says many a family on the reservation functions much the same.

"Growing up with such a large extended family, which to me was immediate family, is how a lot of the Indian families are," Vanderburg says.

Vanderburg says that large extended families help to maintain tribal culture and family traditions, but above all else

they serve as a support system.

Indian family members often live close to one another. In white culture families tend to be more mobile. But on reservations, people are tied more closely to the land that was declared theirs by the federal government. Close proximity of individuals helps foster close, extended families.

Louis' daughters Myrna and Brenda live on his property, a little more than a stone's throw away, and Ray, Maxine, Arleen, Andrea and Jason all live in Arlee and St. Ignatius. They say they've learned that the support of loving family can carry them through even the tough times.

"We have to maintain that love so when (Louis) leaves us we're still a family," Myrna says. "We still have a place; we're still the Adams family."

"I've told my daughters the greatest battles you'll ever have is with yourself. I mean I was no angel, but if there's any way I can help them not go through these things, that's a plus."

Louis Adams

Reflections of the past, visions of the future



A lunch crowd lounges outside the Chicken Coop restaurant in Lame Deer. From left are Walter Whistling Elk, Alfred Seminole, Cedric Spotted Elk, James Tall Bull and Jake Two Birds.

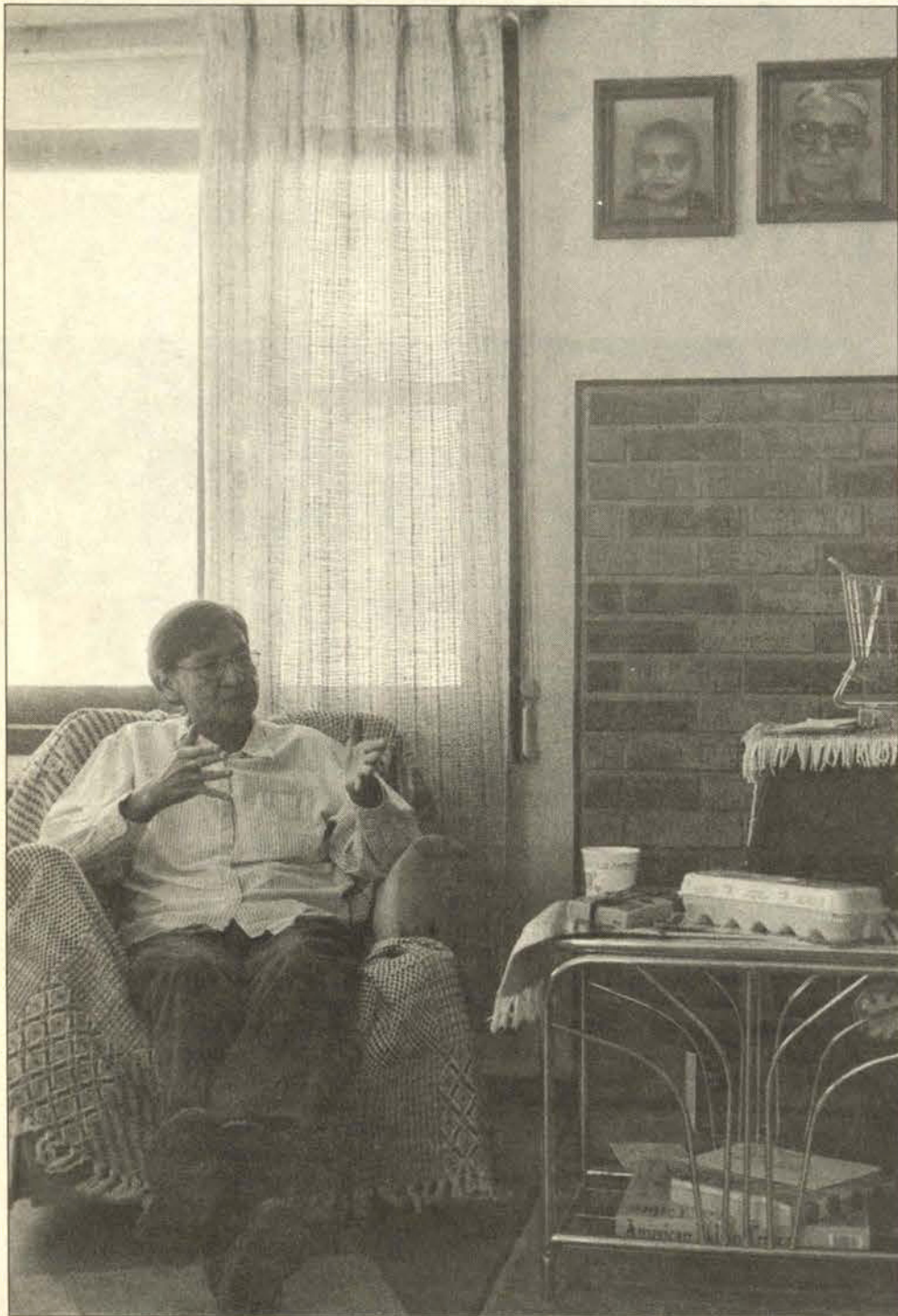
In her role as tribal council president, Geri Small offers unconditional understanding toward her people - an open ear and an open heart to both the old and young.



Northern Cheyenne children link hands outside a home in Busby. Charity Limberhand, Crystal Limberhand, Edith Jefferson and Isiah Limberhand are outside to play on a crisp spring afternoon.



Northern Cheyenne tribal president Geri Small pauses briefly from a task of signing paychecks for tribal government employees. A portrait of Chief Little Wolf, one of the tribe's early leaders, hangs behind her at the tribal office building. Small strives to reflect traditional Northern Cheyenne leadership values of patience, compassion and objectivity, whether dealing with small problems or the big challenges that confront the tribe.



Rubie Sooktis, a Northern Cheyenne elder, discusses the Cheyenne kinship system and the life-time learning process of understanding Northern Cheyenne culture. Photographs of her mother, Margaret Josephine Sooktis, and her father, Charles Sooktis Sr., hang overhead.

A reflection of a painting of Chief Little Wolf shines on the solid oak table as the president of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe sits at its head.

Not missing a beat, Geri Small dispenses with several tasks at once. As she signs paychecks for all the tribal employees and assigns responsibilities to her aide, she also tries to solve a problem brought to her by a tribal council member. Some elders are stuck in their truck, which is stuck in a ditch, and someone has to help them get out. Small doesn't mind being asked to find a solution to a problem most political leaders would regard as trivial.

But Small understands the symbolism, as well as the reality, of having both an

open ear and an open heart.

"There's those little things that are important to the people so we try to help," Small says.

But many of the problems facing the first elected woman president of the 8,000-member Northern Cheyenne Tribe are not so small.

In testimony before Congress last July, Small said her administration works daily to try to improve life on the reservation where housing shortages mean 700 families are on a waiting list for homes and many existing homes are crumbling because of "shoddy construction" by "unscrupulous contractors." And while nearly all of the 455,000-acre reservation



Geri Small and her family close the evening of her birthday party as she makes calls to friends and extended family. She believes that too much reliance is placed on outside sources, such as talk shows and self-help books and not enough on family. She says she likes to heed the saying, "Let us be mindful of our people."

is held in trust, which means the tribe has control over land use on the reservation, it also means it lacks a tax base and must rely on federal help. Further, its unemployment rate is fixed at 65 percent, Small testified.

"The Northern Cheyenne Tribe has many needs," she told the Committee on Indian Affairs, noting that the tribal administration tries daily to address those needs. "However," she said, "we are overwhelmed and often feel like we are trying to put out a forest fire with a garden hose."

She ticked off the tribe's challenges beyond housing and unemployment, including the need for tribal waste and water systems, fire protection, better health care, an irrigation system, a justice facility and the need for the state to address the effects of coal bed methane development on and near the reservation.

These issues, although more modern, are similar to those that Chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf faced in the 19th century when they wanted to preserve their families, their way of life and their land.

The two leaders led their people from Oklahoma, where they had been banished after the Battle of the Greasy Grass — known for a century to white America as Custer's Last Stand — to their ancestral lands in southeastern Montana.

Their successor has faced no lesser task in leading her tribe into the 21st century since being sworn in as Northern Cheyenne tribal council president in November 2000.

"It's always been a man's job that I have done," says Small, who has been a police officer, a forestry technician and an emergency medical technician. "There has never been a woman president before, but that's not why I ran."

In 1990, when one of Small's nephews died, which is still too raw for her or her family to talk about, it made her think about the reservation. "I was involved in our ceremonies, which helped me grow and think a lot," she says. "That's when I decided to go for tribal council."

When she ran for tribal council and then the presidency, Small drew strength from her family. As the youngest of 10 brothers and sisters, she says nothing could have prepared her better for problem solving and community idealism than her huge family.

In her tiny house, down the street from the tribal office, Small celebrated her recent birthday with nieces, nephews, siblings and her parents. Piles of food covered every available countertop and the smell of a home-cooked meal made mouths water. Turkey, mashed potatoes and stuffing were served before homemade lemon meringue pie. From her sister Gail she received a Pendleton blanket. Her mother gave her her own treasured stone jewelry set that Small had often admired.

At the festive gathering, Small family members joked and laughed as they shared food in honor of Small's birth.

"My family is my biggest support," Small says. "When I am troubled or struggling I run things by them." She says her close-knit family has helped her develop a strong listening skill, the cornerstone to her success.

"I am a big listener," Small explains. "The people out there help me make the decisions; I don't make them myself."

Her mother, who has long worked in reservation schools, and father, a retired rancher, taught her the tribe's traditional ways. In her office she burns sweetgrass or cedar, also known as smudging, which

is a purification ceremony. Every day she prays and every once in awhile she sweats, which is an equivalent to the Euro-American spa with religious intentions. "I don't know how anyone could do without it," Small says.

Traditionally, Northern Cheyenne people do not talk about themselves because it is seen as bragging and a bad sign, Small says. But there were plenty of people willing to brag about Small for her.

Tribal program administrator Gloria Waters agrees that Small is a good listener. "She deals with things all the time," Waters said. "During the week, at night, on the weekends. Many people would say that these problems are little, but Geri listens to them all."

Waters thinks she is a good leader because she comes from a good family. "To me," she says, "they are all looking to take care of their tribal members."

Her belief in traditional ways helps her make decisions for the tribe, but all tribal leaders struggle because they can't satisfy everybody, Waters said. "It's for the people that she's a hard worker," she says.

That ethic, she believes, comes from Small's family. "A lot of her strength comes from her family and friends," she says. "I really believe that."

That family strength has shown itself in other members beyond Geri. For example, her sister Gail is an attorney who has served on the tribal council, as has another sister, and a brother has a doctorate degree. Another sister, Susanne, was honored with a national small business-woman of the year award.

Family is Small's pride and sustenance. "If you have family you're rich," she says.

Her mother, Mabel Small, who wears a ring with all 10 of her children's birth-

stones, taught that philosophy to Small. "This is a good family but it [the family] makes it good," she says. "You always have a place to go."

That sense of family obligation and support started as far back as Small can remember.

The youngest child, she was always tended to by someone in the family, most often her oldest sister, Jenny Lou.

"I was always around my family, never a babysitter," Small says.

Even though the children have grown up and have kids of their own, they are still close.

"We always celebrate birthdays, graduations by getting together," Small says. They also support family members in other ways. "We also have prayers for each other through sweat lodge, peyote meetings and other prayers," she says.

Others outside the family recognize their strengths.

Two years ago, Alan Blackwolf voted for Small to be president because he knew she would bring a voice to some problems. "I knew she would put a new direction to this place," Blackwolf says. "Her mom worked at the school when I was there a long time ago and I knew Geri would have an understanding of that kind of steadiness."

Knowing everybody by name, greeting everybody with a smile, and making sure everyone's needs are getting met isn't all she does well, Blackwolf says. "She's always got something on her mind; I'll ask her, 'How's it going?' and she's always busy."

"She's doing well right now; the town's more improved," Blackwolf said of Small's performance as president.

One of the recent tasks Small has shouldered is the Sand Creek Massacre Site Project, which she co-chairs. Black



The Small family holds a dinner party in celebration of Geri's 41st birthday. Geri expresses delight over a birthday gift from her mother, Mabel, a jewelry set her mother owned that Geri had admired.

Kettle, known as a friend to the whites and a peacemaker, had camped for the winter with Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs and their followers at Sand Creek in southeastern Colorado. About 700 volunteer soldiers, led by Col. John Chivington, a proponent of exterminating all Indians, attacked the camp on Nov. 29, 1864. Many Indians escaped, but an estimated 150 people, the majority women and children, were killed as they tried to flee up a dry creekbed. The soldiers used howitzers to attack them as the Cheyenne and Arapaho dug into the sand in a futile attempt at protection. After the killings soldiers mutilated the bodies.

Congress has authorized establishing the location as a national historic site under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. Small's committee will erect a memorial to honor the people who died and to provide a symbol of healing for the victims' descendants.

Whether the projects are large, like the Sand Creek one, or small, like helping elders in a pinch, Small draws on her family's sense of helping others.

The Northern Cheyenne have a kinship system where nieces and nephews are like children and aunts and uncles play the disciplinarians. Cousins become siblings. The parents' and grandparents' only job is to love the children and nourish their lives and dreams.

For every Cheyenne life begins and ends with the family, says Rubie Sooktis. Sooktis, who is descended from a revered Cheyenne chief, has known the Small family her whole life. The history of Northern Cheyenne people also has affected Small's life, Sooktis said. In 1878 Chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf ran away from Indian Territory because they knew that if they stayed their people would die of

hunger or sickness. They decided they would rather die trying to get back to their homeland in southeastern Montana. They did it for the future generations, the unborn, so they would have a homeland and never be homeless, Sooktis says. Small understands that tradition and incorporates it into her decisions about the tribe.

For example, the Northern Cheyenne tribe owns most of their reservation land, not having sold it to non-Indians, and that has been a priority for generations and remains true today, Sooktis says.

When the state or a private firm proposes land uses that will degrade the quality of land and water on the reservation, Small knows that the Cheyenne have revered the land and not cashed in with coal and energy contracts that bring short-term gains and long-term losses.

"President Small has maintained the homeland," Sooktis said. "It's a challenge when you have millions of dollars worth of coal that could make the Cheyenne rich."

But Sooktis says Small's family values are evident in everything.

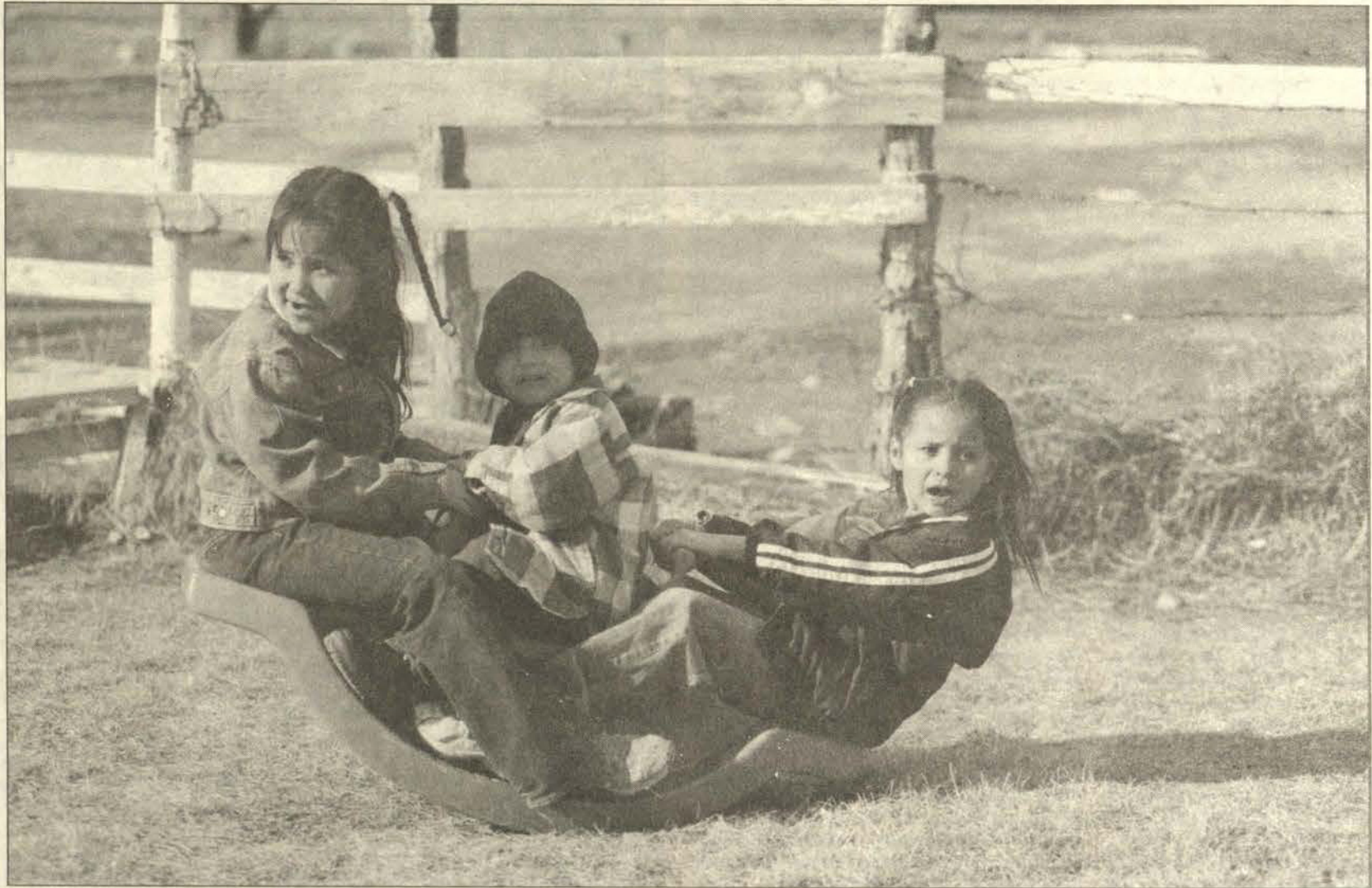
"A Cheyenne is a reflection of their family and how they have been taught," Sooktis says. "Geri comes from a family that demonstrates the old preservation system through the language, knowledge and stories."

And Small has been able to maintain the homeland because of her family, Sooktis said. "Like the white man's saying that 'behind every man is a strong woman,' behind every Cheyenne is a family."

"It's not just Geri Small you're talking about; it's her parents, her brother and sisters," Sooktis said. "That's what makes Geri Small; that's who she is and who she continues to be."



Mabel Small, Geri's mother, loves jewelry, but a ring that contains 10 birthstones, one for each of her children, holds special meaning for her.



Three children stir up some fun on a teeter-totter outside their home in the town of Busby on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. From left are Joelle Emerson, Koeby Emerson and Allie Bears Comes Out. *Photo by Michael Coles*

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Cover photo by Sarah Bonvallet

Rosalyn Pablo, granddaughter of Louis Adams, kisses her 4-year-old daughter, Matilda, at an Adams family birthday celebration. Rosalyn was pregnant at 15 and planned to have her aunt and uncle adopt the baby when it was born. During the pregnancy she had a change of heart and has been raising her daughter with the help of her mother, Maxine.