

1998

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1998



Assimilation and the modern world have altered not just a way of life for Indians, but their very identity as a people. Who is an Indian? And what experiences define being Indian in Montana?

Indian Identity

A Special Report by the School of Journalism

The University of Montana

Indian Identity

Montana's
Indians
1998

*WHO IS AN INDIAN? AND WHAT
ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF
BEING INDIAN IN MONTANA?*

For most Americans the answer to the first question has always been as obvious as a reflection in a mirror.

Thirty years ago, when a Harvard anthropologist was asked to decide whether a distinct group of North Carolinians was Indian, he took along calipers and a steel tape. The answer, he decided, would lie in physical traits, in his painstaking measurement of cheekbones, lips, earlobes and noses.

For many non-Indians, that superficial assessment persists despite centuries of assimilation, centuries of living alongside America's native peoples. Stereotypes die hard. Who is an Indian? It's a matter of appearances, of speech patterns, of things you can see and hear.

Or is it?

For many natives, the question runs much deeper, and it is hardly simple.

Who is an Indian?

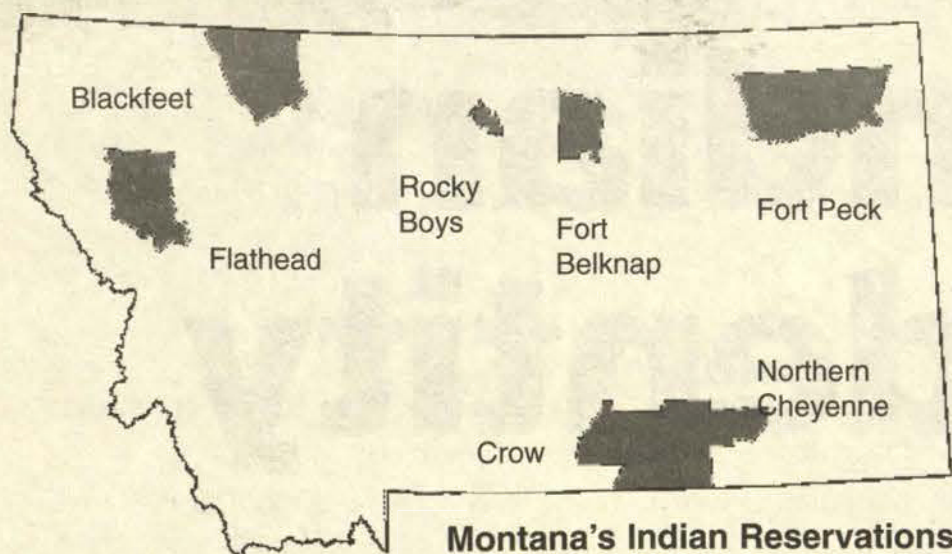


Molly Bullshoe, right, spends time with two of her 66 grandchildren, Ellie, left, and Elizabeth.

In Montana, the answer varies from tribe to tribe and is fraught with implications. It means entitlements, such as eligibility for health care and housing, a chance to compete for tribal money for higher education, or small cash outlays at the end of the year.

But more important, it has come to mean greater likelihood of early death, and a higher rate of illness and disease. It also means working for a higher education, then having to earn a place once back on the reservation. It can mean owning trust land, but being bound by antiquated laws that control how the land is used. For many of Montana's Indians it means enduring racism on a regular basis, or even fighting prejudices on their own reservations.

Who is Indian? Nineteen journalism students looked into the question. They hope their stories offer insights. But they learned ultimately that how a people see themselves comes mainly from inside.



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Cover Photo: Janes Bullshoe, one of Leo and Molly Bullshoe's 66 grandchildren, chases after siblings while playing at the Bullshoe ranch near Heart Butte, Mont. Photo by Lem Price

Montana's Indians is a reporting project of The University of Montana School of Journalism. This is the 7th special report on issues affecting Native Americans who reside within Montana's borders. This honors class was taught by journalism professors Carol Van Valkenburg and Dan McComb. Graphics are data from the Natural Resource Information System, courtesy of the Montana State Library, Helena.

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Indian Identity

A Special Report by the The University of Montana School of Journalism

Owning Indian Country

Page 4



Regulations once meant to protect Indians' individual land holdings are today making productive use of the land by heirs a monumental task.

Living With Dying

Page 8



Few Native American families are untouched by tragedy. Accidents, illness and death are pervasive on the reservations. One Northern Cheyenne family cannot escape the sorrow.

Defining A Nation

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What makes a person Blackfeet? Lineage, language and tradition, some tribal members say. If blood quantum were the only guide, one day there could be no more Indians.

Cheyenne Soul Searching

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On the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, one religion employs peyote to help its followers look inward. Another tries to meld native traditions with Christian practices. And a new denomination hopes to change a people.

An Uneasy Education

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Leaving the reservation for an education is a daunting prospect. And coming home with a degree is sometimes harder than leaving.

Pride and Prejudice

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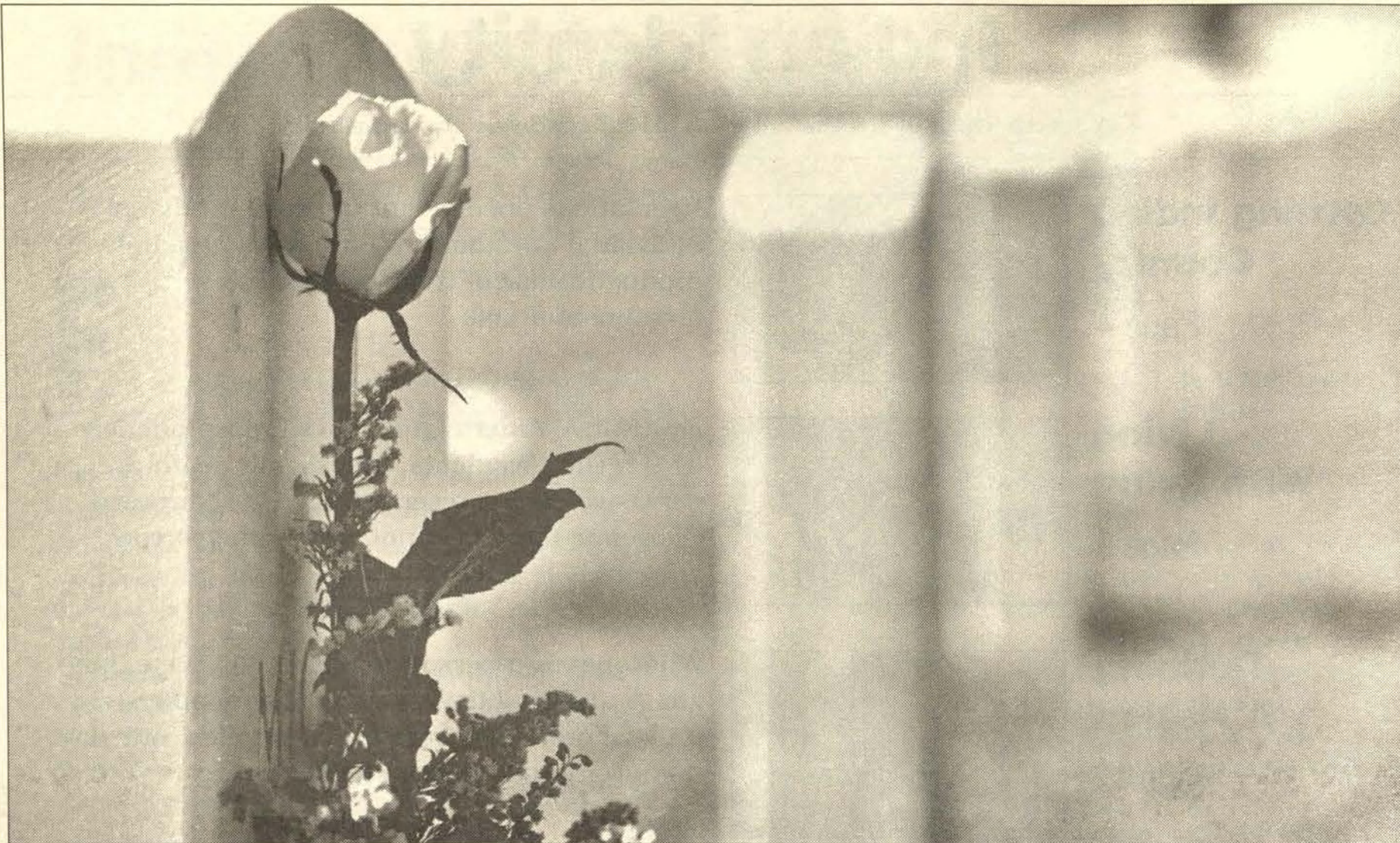
Native Americans accustomed to living around friends and family confront the pain of prejudice when they leave the reservation.

Choosing who Belongs

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Determining enrollment in Fort Belknap's Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes involves scrutinizing blood quantum and family histories and meeting tribal regulations.



When an owner of trust land dies, dividing the parcel among family members can be like trying to split a hair

Owning Indian Country

Gladys Jefferson and her family spent more than \$1,500 fencing 120 acres that were not even hers.

The land had been in her family since the turn of the century when the federal government allotted Crow Reservation lands to individual tribal members. The plan was to turn the Indians into farmers and assimilate them into white society. Many Crows, like Gladys Jefferson's parents, were given

few clues and little incentive to find their land on the 2.3 million-acre reservation.

Story by
**Lisa A.
Kerscher**

Photos by
**Melissa
Hart**

Twenty years ago, Jefferson decided to find the family's holdings and put the land to use.

"My folks had never known where their lands were," Jefferson says. "We figured we'd go find it so we could fence it off and take cattle there to graze during the summer if we couldn't

get a better lease on it."

Fortified with a township and range location from her land title, Jefferson headed to the reservation's Bureau of Indian Affairs land office. Referring to a map, the BIA agent showed Jefferson about where the



Charles Yarlott's modular home sits on 400 acres up Reno Creek. The home, ready with a propane tank and furniture, waits for power lines and Yarlott's arrival.

land was located up a gravel road near old Highway 87. "He told us to go on the road so far, and what landmarks to look for, and that's where it would be," she recalls. Kneeling on her wood floor at her home in Crow Agency, Jefferson pores over an unfurled map that plots land ownership on the Crow. Her finger retraces her quest along the reservation's myriad property lines, past the jumbled hues that signify ownership.

The family drove west from Crow Agency for awhile. Turned up the gravel road. Passed a distinct group of trees. Found the spot and began to build the fence. "Whenever someone had some money, we'd buy more supplies and work on it," Jefferson says.

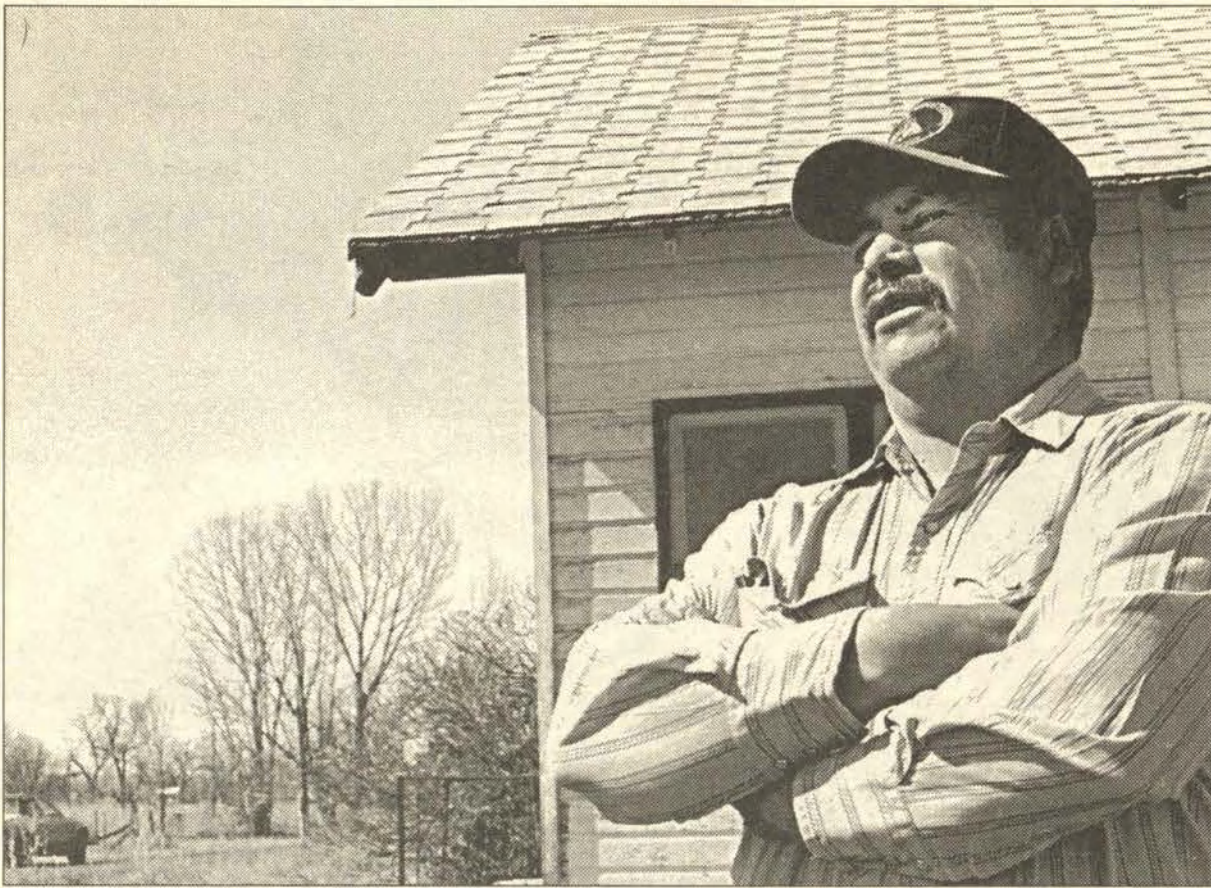
But when a BIA land appraiser finally went out to assess her investment, he found out her land was farther north, outside the fence. "It was clear on the other side of what he first told us," she says. "The kids kinda got disappointed. Three months of work and we ended up taking down the fence."

That mistake — and a host of other problems — results from the modern mess of land ownership on the Crow Reservation.

Darryl LaCounte, land titles and records manager for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Billings, says such problems are the result of "a lot of laws that were passed to protect Indians that are now really binding."

Facing a wall of maps in his corner office, LaCounte refers to a land title that shows some of the complications those laws cause. When a landowner dies without a will — a common occurrence on the reservation — the law splits the property evenly among any children, if no spouse survives.

But inheriting land on the reservation isn't merely a matter of splitting up the acreage into smaller pieces. If an owner holds one-seventh of an interest, for example, he owns one-seventh of every square inch of the parcel. That means owners ultimately end up with scattered fragments, making them difficult to



Opposite page, left: The Crow joined Gen. George Custer in the battle of the Little Bighorn. The tribe was known for cooperating with the government and that may be the reason its members received the largest land allotments in Montana, says BIA land titles manager Darryl LaCounte.

Left: Charles Yarlott and his family live in a century-old deteriorating home while he tries to find a way to get power lines to his new home up Reno Creek.

If an owner of trust land holds one-seventh of an interest, he holds one-seventh of every square inch of the parcel

put into productive use.

"A lot of times you feel so bad for these people — they think they own so much, but they own only this," LaCounte says, indicating just a fraction.

Some of the original allotments to Crow tribal members were spread out across the reservation. That means land split into fragments by the federal trust inheritance laws is further fragmented by the nature of the original land grants.

To make matters worse, sometimes land falls out of trust status — and becomes fee land — and the BIA no longer has jurisdiction over it. This can happen when land is sold to non-Indians or because a non-Indian spouse inherited a fractional share. If an owner of trust land dies without a spouse, children or a will, then the share returns to the tribe.

"It's a difficult thing to manage, because most people are not aware of what happens to their land when they die," LaCounte says.

These conditions make using the land a battle against red tape and hard feelings.

LaCounte says co-owners have the responsibility to either assert their property rights or be compensated for someone else using the land. But the land fractionation is so bad that "many, many people make less than \$1 per year," he says. "There are people who own so little that their interest never generates a penny. Never."

On one 160-acre tract, for example, several people own 1/332,640 undivided interest. If consolidated, each of those owners would be sitting on a piece of land the size of a couch. Only after several thousand years would a penny be tallied from it, assuming the fractionation stopped there because they had no heirs.

In the early 1980s, Congress passed laws that allowed tribes to take land from individual owners whose share was less than 2 percent if the income from the land didn't total \$100 during one of the five years before the owner's death. William Youpee had a will and his heirs, not the tribes, should have acquired his small holdings in Montana and the Dakotas. But Youpee had never been notified that those shares might be taken when he died, so his

heirs challenged the law. About a year ago, the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional, because the owners were not compensated.

Compensation can be very costly, though. Youpee, for example, owned undivided interests in several tracts of land across three reservations. Their value totaled \$1,239. The appraisal work done to compensate the heirs cost more than the land was worth. "We're just in this fix," LaCounte concludes, "and everything you do probably costs more than your interest in it."

A dozen years ago, Charles Yarlott had land that was not in fractions and he wanted to put a house on it. However, his 460 acres were mostly inaccessible by roads, so he proposed trading it to the tribe for 400 acres up Reno Creek, close to Crow Agency. The trade took three years, but his sole ownership is secure.

Yarlott got a brand new modular home, complete with furniture, through Housing and Urban Development a couple years ago. He planted it just off the gravel county road, realizing that he needed to get electric lines strung out to his place. Yet three years later, the power lines still end two miles short of his lifeless house. Meanwhile, he's powering up for court.

The Rural Electrification Administration estimated the total cost to extend the lines at nearly \$15,000. Earlier this year, the tribe agreed to cover 75 percent of it, and REA trimmed the cost some. But Yarlott is still left with a \$3,200 bill. "They need the whole sum up front," Yarlott says, "but I'm not Howard Hughes. I'm just trying to make a living. I offered to pay \$50 a month with the regular bill, but they wouldn't budge whatsoever."

Ironically, REA still owes Yarlott for building lines across his father's allotment — the 460 acres he traded — in the early 1950s. Yarlott's offer to simply swap tabs was refused. When he recently got \$3,000 from the federal housing department to help cover the new wiring job, he thought he was in the clear. But REA "didn't want it," he says. "They told me to send the check back." Yarlott says the power co-op insists on resolving the old easement dispute, before moving

ahead with the new lines. It's still in dispute.

So for now, instead of living 10 miles closer to his job at Crow Agency, Yarlott still lives in St. Xavier, one of the five towns in which most Indian families live on the reservation. His century-old home, on a dirt road just off the highway, used to belong to his in-laws. The Yarlotts pay taxes on it, because the town owns the land. Yarlott's place is one of several homes lined up opposite a rusting rural fire truck and an empty foundation left from a burned-down house. A silent schoolyard is a stone's throw away. At the highway's edge, the abandoned grade school's warm brick face and broken windows are engulfed in horseflies buzzing louder than the passing traffic. A green chalkboard inside announces a meeting scheduled for Oct. 18, 1983.

Yarlott's decade-old dream of tranquil security has disintegrated. After he tows REA into court, Yarlott says, the BIA is next. "For faulting on their trust responsibility," he says. The BIA and the tribe's superintendent, Yarlott contends, are supposed "to see that Indians get a better deal. But the BIA said they blamed it on us for letting it happen." Yarlott is determined to get justice on the reservation, but an attorney will cost money, which is hard to come by because apparently banks rarely loan to Indians.

In a recent report from the General Accounting Office, the investigatory arm of Congress, out of the 1.2 million Indians living on trust lands nationwide, only 91 got conventional mortgage loans for homes between 1992 and 1996 and 128 got federally guaranteed private loans between 1983 and 1997.

Gerald Sherman, an Oglala Indian, has worked as a banker for 10 years. "In banking, I can't say racism doesn't exist," he says, but he believes many people's sense of discrimination is rooted in misunderstanding and the absence of business standards.

Most Indians are unfamiliar with how banks work, because few exist on reservations. Sherman works at Hardin's First Interstate Bank, just outside the Crow Reservation. He says lenders often won't risk doing business there, because reservations lack Uniform Commercial Codes, which "spell out all the rules for

Water is one of the many natural resources abundant on the Crow Reservation. These resources offer the tribe an opportunity to earn money from their land.



doing commerce." On the reservation there are no codes dealing with foreclosure and repossession issues, for example.

Sherman says most banks near reservations are lending anyway, and updated federal regulations makes sure banks serve local low-income residents without bias.

More often, discrimination may be a matter of perception. "If a white person gets treated badly by a bank, he sees it as bad customer service," Sherman says. A person with color may see it as racism. The bottom line is that "people are more comfortable dealing with people like themselves."

Unlike Yarlott, most landowners have given up any dreams of living on their land. Ninety-nine percent of trust land on the Crow is leased, most often to non-Indians.

Lynda Whiteman owns 1/35th of 480 acres — about 14 acres if it could be consolidated. She used to get about \$90 a year by leasing it with the other owners to a non-Indian farmer, Marvin R. Knutson, who has lived and farmed near Reno Creek for 27 years. Thanks to her husband's severance pay and his understanding of the leasing game, her annual profit has been \$1,500 to \$3,000 over the last three years.

"The bottom line is money," her husband, Everett Whiteman, says. "You need money to make money." When he left the BIA leasing department after 29 years of service, Whiteman used his severance pay to help his wife outbid Knutson's lease. The Whitemans pay the annual leasing fee of \$5,600 and hire Knutson to farm it, but they and the other



Gladys Jefferson, above, says her generation never questioned what was happening to their land because they trusted the white man and were taught it was disrespectful to question elders. After 29 years of service with the BIA leasing department, Everett Whiteman, left, was able to help his wife lease the plot of land in which she has an undivided interest.

owners still make more from it than before.

Even if an Indian wanted to farm the land himself, a used Ford tractor might cost \$2,000. Owners wanting to invest in their land face other obstacles as well. The Whitemans, for example, had 3,000 bushels of wheat in storage they wanted to use as collateral for a loan until they sold it at higher market prices. Knutson co-signed for them a year ago at the First Interstate Bank in Hardin to confirm their wheat stock. "I don't have a problem with helping these people," Knutson says. "If I know you, and I know your word is good, then to hell with the bank."

Knutson tends about 3,000 acres — farming wheat and hay and running cattle. Some of it he purchased as fee land, but he estimates that he leases a lot of it from about 250 owners. "I'm one of the few dinosaurs left

that do my own leasing work," he notes. Unlike most people who go through leasing companies, "if you're going to lease somebody's land, I've always felt it's common courtesy to meet one-on-one" with the landowners, he says.

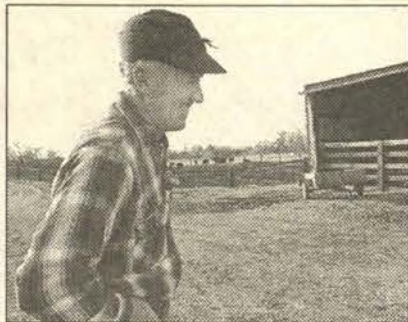
Sometimes, though, many people don't know they own land and many others have such a small interest, they don't care what happens to it. "Most people won't put \$10 in their gas tank to decide on something they'll lose money on," Everett Whiteman says. Thus, a lease can be signed with only 51 percent of the owners agreeing to the contract. The superintendent can sign for the minority, whether they want it or not. To allow one owner to live on part of the land or to mortgage it, all of the owners have to approve.

Conflicts between owners often cause emotional tension, as well.

Whiteman says some of the strongest resentment comes "when someone owns a share through a second marriage, and nobody knows it until the lease comes up." A second spouse will get one-third share and children from the first marriage will split two-thirds of it. "That's there on just about every tract," he says.

Even Lynda Whiteman has been fielding uncomfortable calls from co-owners recently. Although she pays the annual leasing fee on time and everyone's making more money than with the old contract, some still aren't satisfied. Some of these owners prefer to go through a leasing company. By doing it the old way, they could get money from the leasing company before the yearly lease payment's due, but they usually have to pay 15 percent interest for the advance.

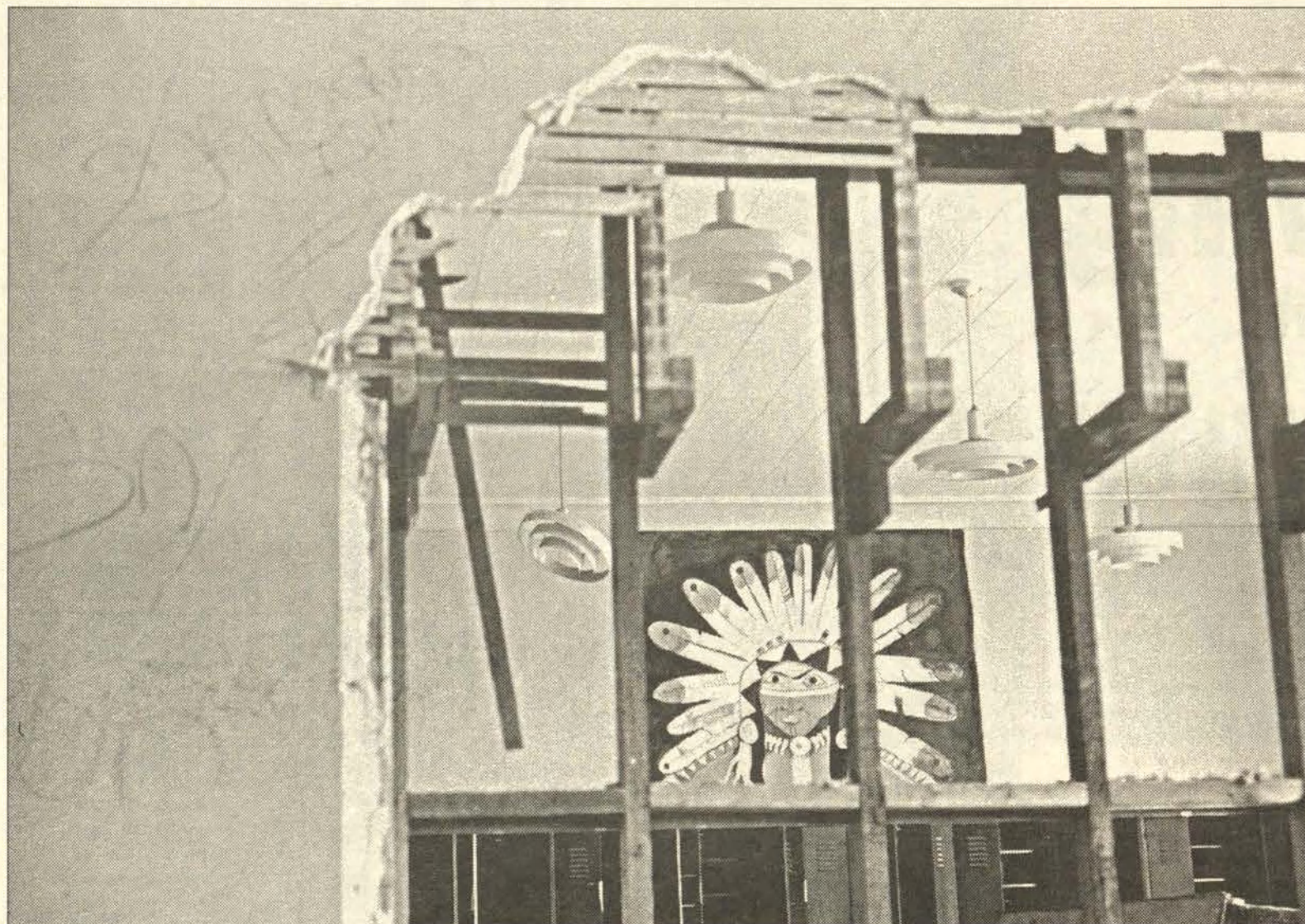
Many of these land-use challenges arise



“ If I know you, and I know your word is good, then to hell with the bank.

Marvin Knutson

”



Marvin Knutson, top, farms fee land and trust land he leases from Crow Indians. “I’ve never had any problems with the BIA, but it’s somewhat different and sometimes more difficult. It’s easier to deal directly with the people than with the bureaucracy,” he says. At left, a broken-down wall gives way to a mural in the St. Xavier School.

because the owners don’t understand the complex laws. Over the last several decades, Everett Whiteman, now a clerk for the tribe’s Crow Land Resource Committee, has had people come into his office saying, “Tell me where my one-hundredth of an interest on that tract is.”

Gladys Jefferson believes the Crow’s tradition of trust has reinforced an outdated way of doing things.

“We never questioned our elders,” she says “so we figured our parents knew what they were doing” in signing the leasing contracts the white people encouraged. “Even \$100 was a lot to them. In the long run we found out we were cheated.”

But younger land owners, such as Jefferson’s eldest daughter, Jannell Jefferson, have begun questioning the customary compliance. While growing up here, Jefferson, 24, watched a non-Indian farmer go from driving a beat-up truck and living in a run-down house to owning a new Ford, six other trucks, a car phone and a nicer house. Her family got a yearly \$25 check from leasing the land to him.

What she saw as a blatant inequity fueled

her defiance of the old procedures, questioning everything out loud in a way uncommon among Indians. The new attitude upset her mother, though, especially on lease renewal days. “I would tell her, ‘Don’t be so mean. They’re good to us,’” Gladys Jefferson recalls. “I was always worried about ruining those relationships.” Her daughter argued that the leasing people acted nice because they wanted the cheap contracts signed quickly.

Gladys Jefferson understands her daughter’s frustration, though it does make her uncomfortable.

After signing the lease, “once you walk out that door, you’re an Indian,” Gladys Jefferson says. “We don’t know if they’ve screwed us or not, but they’re trying to make money off us.”

Today Jefferson and her family know where their lands are, and she hopes her children become more educated about the issues. “Now it’s tradition,” Jefferson says. “Every Mother’s Day, we go way out in the boonies and check out our land.” They also take pains to “show our grandkids how to read the (property) book.”

Some people, like Darryl LaCounte and Everett Whiteman, try to encourage owners

to think ahead and write a will outlining where the land should go. “But many of these people are superstitious,” Whiteman says, “and they see it as writing their death sentence.”

Some Indians think most of the conflicts over land would disappear if all the individual holdings reverted to tribal ownership. Then “we wouldn’t have all these jurisdictional problems,” Everett Whiteman says. The appraisal process to compensate everyone would be long and costly, but the government would only have to do it once.

Some lawyers suggest several other solutions: promoting voluntary consolidation; designating a single beneficiary; swapping interests; and, most important, educating owners so they can assume a more active role in what happens to their land.

All agree these deep-rooted problems need to be resolved. But most familiar with the land ownership situation acknowledge that the problems are so complex that creating legislation to remedy them is difficult. Yet with the birth of every new heir, delaying a search for a resolution will only continue to divide the land and its people.

Living with Dying

Story by
**Paige
Parker**

Photos by
**Ann
Williamson**

Losing a loved one is difficult for anyone, but for Native Americans, the pain is all too frequent.



Tonya Killsnight is buried at the Harris family ranch a few miles from Lame Deer.

It was Maynard who was crushed beneath the boulder.

Two other of Mae Whitedirt's children died in infancy, of pneumonia. Another daughter drank poison and was hospitalized five months before succumbing. But it's Maynard and his cousins that everybody on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation still talk about.

Maynard Whitedirt and four of his cousins were playing tag in the sandrock, sage and pine-covered hills near Lame Deer, on the reservation in southeast Montana two hours away from Billings. As they played, rocks tumbled from above, claiming all but one of the children. Maynard was 7. It was 1968. And it was the beginning of hard times for the Whitedirt family.

Mae Whitedirt lost four of her seven children before her 46th birthday. She's seen too much death. But her story is not unusual in Native American families.

Indian Health Service statistics reveal what many Indian families know from experience:

Indians die young more often than non-Indians. An Indian in the United States is twice as likely as a non-Indian to die before the age of 65. The causes are many, but the result is the same.

Four generations of the Whitedirt family have suffered the human drama behind those statistics.

Whitedirt doesn't like to speak much about the four children who didn't make it. As she sits in the kitchen of her tidy, battered house, she directs attention instead to the pictures of her 15 grandchildren that cover the wall above the fireplace. She has raised six of them.

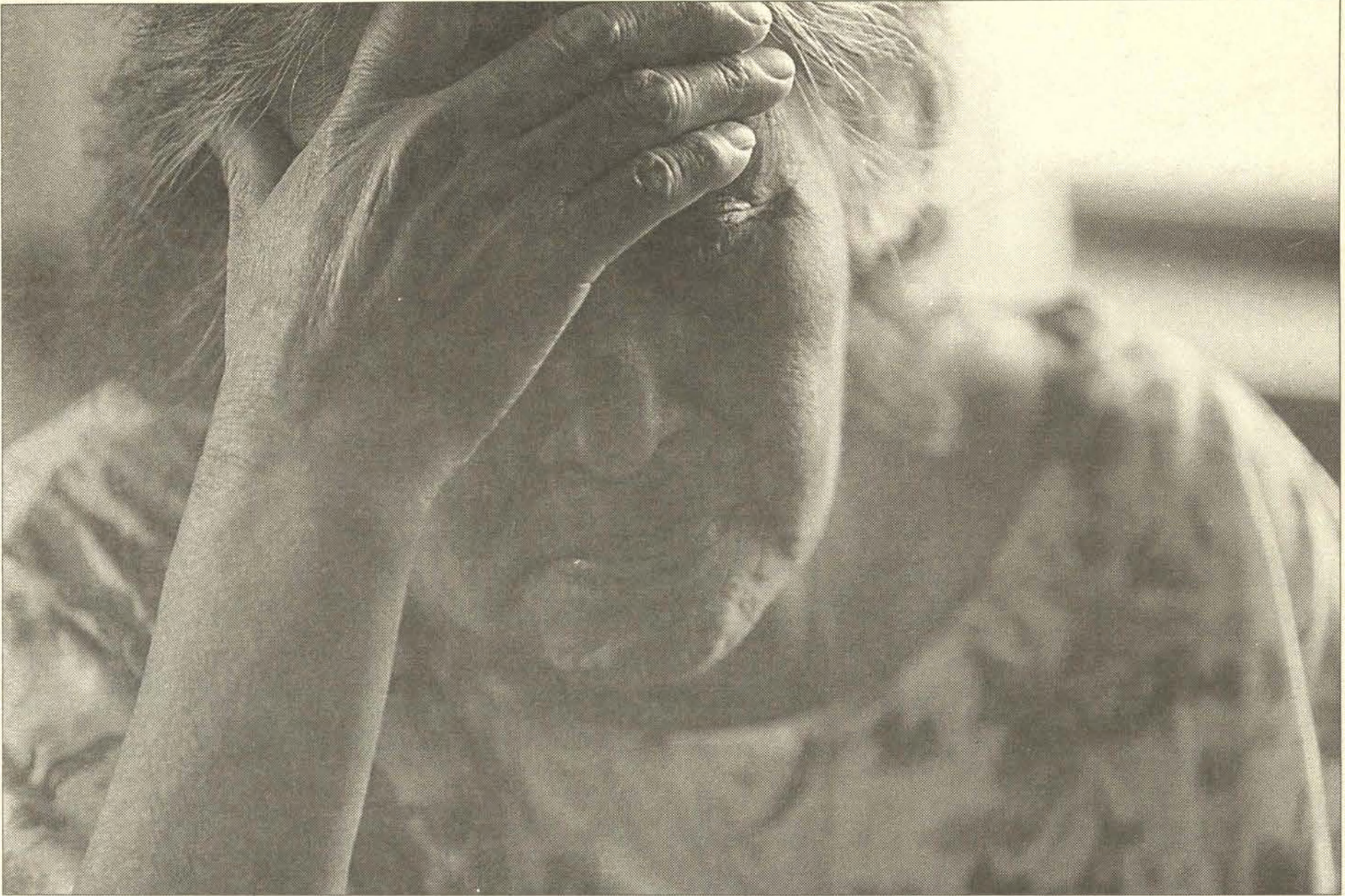
Elrena Whitedirt is one of Mae Whitedirt's three surviving children. She gives details about the deaths of her brothers and sisters that her mother can't or won't tell. She says that Jacqueline and Farley were the babies who died, years apart, of pneumonia. She blames what were inadequate medical facilities on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation for their deaths. "They both died on the way to the hospital in Crow," she says, referring to the adjacent Indian reservation.

Indian babies die at a rate 26 percent higher than non-Indian babies, the Indian Health Service reports.

Elrena was 10 at the time of Maynard's accident. The children had all been playing near Elrena's grandparents' house when the game changed course. They ran off toward the red hills, which many Northern Cheyennes consider sacred. Elrena said the accident scene was a gruesome one. "When we found them they were all smashed up," she says. The rock that fell on them weighed close to 20 tons.

Indians have a 265 percent greater chance than non-Indians of dying in accidents, the IHS reports.

The day after the accident, the Whitedirt family brought a medicine man out to the red hills. As they stood at the spot where the boulder fell they sang death songs and burned cedar. What happened next, Elrena Whitedirt says, could best be described as a vision of the previous day's tragedy. Whitedirt says the family heard a dog barking, the voices of the children laughing, the sounds of running, then rocks tumbling and then screams. She says the



Mae Whitedirt struggles to remember stories of her family and her children's passings.

sound of a dog barking continued long after the sound of the children's screams fell silent.

Whitedirt says traditional Cheyennes whispered that the deaths happened because the children had shown disrespect for the sacred hills by running and playing there. The Whitedirt family conducted their mourning in the old way, with a wake, a funeral, a feast and a give-away.

"My grandparents had a house full of furniture, with horses and cows and chickens," Whitedirt said. "When they were done, it was empty. They gave away everything. We lived in tents after that. Within a year's time, they had everything they used to have."

The family continued to memorialize the fallen children with an annual pow-wow celebration. The give-away was also held each year, and each time the family was left with nothing but an empty house.

Then the giving stopped and the drinking began. "It wasn't the same," she says. "The family broke apart. That's when alcohol took over." Whitedirt says they have never really healed.

Whitedirt was an eighth-grader in 1972 when her sister, Linda Lou, died after drinking Drano.

"She came home drunk and went into the bathroom. When I went in there she was puking up black stuff. It was sudsy," Whitedirt says.

“
Sometimes I just can't handle some things. I went to Job Corps to be a heavy equipment operator. I can't do that now. I want to get a high-paying job. I want my daughter to have a better life than I did.

Ledeana Little Sun

”

Though the incident took place New Year's Day, the Drano took its time killing Linda Lou, who was 28. She spent five months in a Billings hospital before dying in May. Both Whitedirt and her older sister quit school and joined their parents in Billings, working to help with the family's expenses.

Though the Whitedirt family doesn't call Linda Lou's death a suicide, Indian suicide rates are 85 percent higher than those of non-Indians. Indians

are also three times more likely than non-Indians to die from poisoning.

Now four children are gone. And the tragedies go on, extending into another generation.

Ledeana Little Sun, one of the grandchildren Mae Whitedirt raised, is trying to learn how to be strong at 22. She was 18 years old and five months pregnant when she lost her arm leaping onto a moving train. She had been drinking with her mother, her uncle, her boyfriend and two others in a Billings train yard when her uncle dared them to jump onto the passing train. Little Sun took the dare.

"I was superwoman," Little Sun says. "I remember my feet hitting the ground, then my neck snapped back and I blacked out."

When she regained consciousness, Little Sun was lying next to the train. Her arm was still attached at the bone, but the muscles and tendons were mangled. Her fingertips hurt. She kept trying to get up, but the others wouldn't let her. As her mother screamed in the background, Little Sun called out for her grandmother.

Little Sun woke up in the hospital. Her arm was gone, but Mae Whitedirt was there, as were her other grandparents. "Then they all started fighting," she remembers. "They thought it was my



Ledeana Little Sun shows what is left of her amputated arm.

mom's fault. It was my fault."

After two weeks in the hospital and two more months in rehabilitation, Little Sun was back on her own. The hardest obstacle to overcome since losing her arm has had nothing to do with picking up a pen or a fork. Little Sun had to listen to the cries of Darlyn, born four months after the accident, because she couldn't lift her up to comfort her. But Little Sun eventually learned how to pick up her daughter. Her aunt, Elrena Whitedirt, says Darlyn began helping her mother by lifting herself up to be changed and holding her own bottle when she was just an infant.

Little Sun says that in a way, the wheels of the train that hit her in Billings started moving when her father died of leukemia in 1984. After that, her once devout mother stopped going to church and started drinking. "My mom went downhill real bad," Little Sun says. She and her four brothers and sisters were left for her grandmother to raise, and Little Sun dropped out of high school in the 10th

grade.

Little Sun started drinking. She still does. And so does her mother. She doesn't think she has a drinking problem. "Sometimes I just can't handle some things," she says. "I went to Job Corps to be a heavy equipment operator. I can't do that now. I want to get a high-paying job. I want my daughter to have a better life than I did." Her voice trails off. She is currently on a waiting list for federal housing and is living in Lame Deer with her grandmother Mae Whitedirt.

Indians are 674 percent more likely than non-Indians to become alcoholics, the Indian Health Service reports.

Elrena Whitedirt thinks the Cheyenne are turning away from their culture, and that this is to blame for the deaths and the drinking. "People just aren't bonded together," she explains. "They just kind of forget about each other."

Mae Whitedirt can't forget. Neither can Ledean Little Sun.

When Dr. Margaret Grossman of the Indian Health Service came to Lame Deer almost five years ago, she says a priest told her to expect a funeral every week on this reservation of 7,000 Indians. She has since drawn many comparisons between reservation life and inner-city street life, where poverty is also pervasive.

Statistics show that 48 percent of the residents of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation live below the poverty line, compared to 12 percent of Montanans statewide.

Grossman thinks that the indifference that springs from poverty is to blame for the high death rates. This indifferent, hopeless attitude often leads to drinking and drug use that is associated with many deaths, she says.

She's seen families like Whitedirt's, and knows that death does not discriminate. "I don't think there is any family who has been missed," she says.

Emma Harris is one mother who knows what drug and alcohol abuse can do to a family. On New



Year's Eve 1991, Harris' daughter Tonya Killsnight came home after a night spent drinking with her friends. She hugged Harris, wished her a happy new year, and passed out on her bed. When Harris awoke the next morning, Tonya was gone.

Several days later, Tonya's frozen body was found near the Lame Deer School.

By the time she was 18, Harris had had three children. Her own childhood ended at 13 with the birth of her first son, Delano. Christopher followed. Tonya was both her baby and her best friend. Harris admits she wasn't a good mother. She drank and took drugs, she says, admitting she even sold them. But in November 1991 Harris left the reservation for treatment. Mother and daughter agreed that when Harris was released Tonya would enter a treatment program. Two weeks after Harris came home Tonya was dead.

Harris has stayed sober since her daughter's death and has turned to helping troubled children. She started working at the Lame Deer Boys and Girls Club in 1993 and now works in the 4-H program. Harris says the job helped her find her way, and helped her give kids the help she couldn't give her daughter.

"They are looking for some place to fit in," she says of the children. "They want to feel safe and secure."

Harris is trying to make amends for her earlier failures at motherhood. She has reestablished a relationship with her boys, and says she realizes how her own troubled youth kept her from addressing her children's needs because she was concentrating instead only on herself.



"I thought I was robbed," she says of her childhood. "When I was 14 years old I started working."

Shortly after Tonya's death, Harris became a foster mother. Her foster daughter, Heather, has been with her seven years, and Emma is hoping to adopt her. She sees Heather as her second chance.

Yet many residents of the Northern Cheyenne



Reservation don't get that second chance.

Nurse Nikki Lippert of the Lame Deer Indian Health Service wants non-Indians to understand that the high death rates there and on other reservations are about more than just statistics.

"This is just a reflection of society," she says. "This doesn't just happen in Lame Deer."

"This is just a reflection of society," she says.

"This doesn't just happen in Lame Deer."

Defining a Nation



Rice Crawford stands on a small tepee cover above the emblem of the "bleeding buffalo skull," a symbol of his family, which is present on every tepee cover he makes.

Ancestry, language and tradition are the distinctions that make a person Blackfeet.

Story by
**Katja
Stromnes**

Photos by
**Lem
Price**

In 1934, when the government agent came to the Blackfeet Reservation, he told tribal leaders to identify the Blackfeet people and put them on their rolls.

So the Blackfeet Tribal Council sat down and set the criteria to be Blackfeet. Then they called forth their people. In a book the Blackfeet signed their names and those of their deceased family members.

From that day forward, the council said, an Indian must have a parent or a grandparent in the book to be a tribal member. But in 1962, the federal government added a provision, saying anyone born into the tribe must also have a quarter Blackfeet blood to claim membership.

"Western law has us broken down into pedigree," says G.G. Kipp, a Blackfeet ceremonial leader. "But that's not our traditional way."

What makes someone Blackfeet is not just blood quantum, Kipp and others say. It's language, cultural habits and lineage, according to Conrad LaFromboise, director of higher education for the Blackfeet tribe.

The native view, he says, implies that if people can look at their family history and identify Blackfeet ancestors, then they are Blackfeet.

Blood quantum as the only measure doesn't bode well for the tribe's future.

"Numerically, that's going to work out to zero at some time," LaFromboise says, citing intermarriage.

So to Blackfeet like Kipp and LaFromboise, safeguarding a distinct people means more than checking blood quantum.

And in a world where some Blackfeet children have their own web pages to display their lineage, it's a task that isn't easy.

"We can go many places to learn to be a western man, a western woman,"



Floyd Rider

"The language was lost," says Molly Bullshoe, a 73-year-old retired school teacher, remembering a time when Blackfeet was the common tongue. "There are just a few who talk Blackfeet fluently."

Leo and Molly Bullshoe speak Blackfeet to each other, but English to their 11 children and 66 grandchildren. Their second language was learned more than 70 years ago in Indian boarding school.

"When I was 6 years old, I was put in the mission and I thought I'd never see my parents again," Molly Bullshoe says. "In the mission, if we talked Indian, we got punished. I couldn't speak a word of English. But I had to learn."

When the couple met and began to raise their family, they feared repercussions if they taught their children anything distinctly Blackfeet.

LaFromboise says for the first half of this century most Blackfeet children were sent to missionary schools. While some remained in schools on the reservation, many were sent away. Their language and religion were forbidden.

On the reservations, the federal government also banned Indian ceremonies and

LaFromboise says. "Where can we go to learn to be a Blackfeet man, a Blackfeet woman?"

He says the task starts with approaching the elders, the grandparents who know the language, because Blackfeet language is at the center of what it means to be Indian.

traditions and LaFromboise says many people took them underground.

"They wanted the Blackfeet to put away their heathen ways and be christianized, civilized," LaFromboise says.

Once the government realized its termination and assimilation policies had failed, the Bullshoe family, like many others on the Blackfeet Reservation, revived tribal ceremonies and no longer kept them hidden.

The two styles of life solidified by the elder Bullshoes are what Leo Bullshoe thinks kept the family together through poverty and hardship.

"The good couple pulls together," he says of his marriage of 50 years. "It makes everything nice. Our happiness."

Today, many of the Bullshoes' children are raising their children on their parents' land in the same way — with elements from both white and Indian culture.

The Bullshoe clan lives in farmhouses on the land of their ancestral clan, the Lone Tea Drinkers. For 24 years Molly Bullshoe taught school, eventually teaching culture and language classes.

"I thought, well, an Indian teacher would know how to help an Indian kid," she says. "That was my goal. Because some Indian kids don't get the help from other teachers."

Her own grandchildren are learning things about their roots that her children didn't. Granddaughter Elizabeth Bullshoe, 11, recently asked her grandma to teach her the tribal language. Her grandmother proudly answered yes, but told her it would take time and patience.

The child's pride in her heritage is a trait uncommon in her parents' generation.

"I grew up in the John Wayne era," says Willie Crawford, the son of a traditionalist, who now openly practices Blackfeet ceremonies. "Indians were always the bad guy."

At one point, I was ashamed to be an Indian, but I am getting my dignity back."

His grandmother, too, would not speak Blackfeet to him when he was a boy.

"She was definitely afraid the government was going to come in," he says. "My grandparents talked about the missionaries. They made them kneel on broomsticks for hours if they spoke their own language. They'd get stuck in a room for days."

Not only was the language lost, so were family artifacts.

Crawford's father, Rice, still mourns the loss of the family's Beaver Bundle, stolen from an uncle 40 years ago.

Bundles are made from the soft skin of an animal underbelly and hold inside the family's sacred objects.

They are the most sacred tool of ceremonies that take place after the first thunderstorm of spring. Passing on the meaning of the bundle's contents, and thus the meaning of the ceremony, isn't learned in one sitting, Rice Crawford says.

The elders know it takes years to teach the ceremony and parts lost will never be recaptured.

Many artifacts were sold or stolen during a period in which a flourishing market in Indian artifacts coincided with crushing reservation poverty.

People were starving, especially during the Depression, Leo Bullshoe says. His family survived on government rations as Leo watched his father's cattle and horses sold so the family could survive.

"Tradition died," says Molly Bullshoe. "In those days, it was tempting to hustle for money." More artifacts disappeared as times got tougher.

Today Blackfeet like Rice Crawford attempt to carry on tradition in ways that meld with modern life. They use traditions from the past to make a living in the present. The Crawfords spend their winters selling teepees and drums they make in the ways of their ancestors. And the family has taught traditional ways to their five grown sons, who will pass them on to their children.

Another traditionalist, Floyd Rider, is a healer. In his sweat lodge, with the help of his ancestors, known as the "grandfathers," he uses prayer and ceremony to strengthen those who seek his help.

Rider has never been afraid to practice his cultural traditions because, unlike many Blackfeet children who were sent away to school, Rider was kept home to work on his grandfather's ranch.

Raised Catholic, Rider says 30 years ago



Floyd Rider watches two of his grandsons at play outside his East Glacier home.



Naomei Crawford feeds her disabled daughter, Roberta, a snack at their home in Heart Butte.

he awoke to traditional healing ways on a four-day fast. He decided to ask the Creator and the grandfathers for the ability to heal, and in exchange, he promised to never refuse anyone in need.

Some say he works miracles, but Rider says healing relies on faith.

He uses his sweat lodge several times a week. It's a long and low lodge covered in thick orange carpets. It sits under a tent above the Two Medicine River at the dead end of East Glacier's main paved road.

"What you see out there is the only good thing up here," Rider says, gesturing away from the road and across the river to the deep mountains where he fasts.

He says it might take a miracle to keep tradition alive on the tough reservation caught between two worlds.

The devastation of a lost of self respect and a government policy of relocation hit a generation of adults. Encouraged by the federal government, many Indians moved from the reservation to find employment. Still

others were mired in a rising epidemic of alcoholism. Renewing a tribal tradition, the elder generation stepped in and filled the gaps in family life.

In the late 1940s and '50s, this take on family cultivated a phenomenon called "grandma-babies" that persists today.

Grandma-babies are children born to parents who abandoned them. LaFromboise says the grandma-baby originates from old traditions of people passing their babies on to elders if they were having a streak of bad luck.

Bob Tailfeathers, dean of student services at Blackfeet Community College, says it's common.

"In my family right now," says Tailfeathers, "my sister's considered grandma ... with the little kids. It's a respectful thing."

A number of those Blackfeet raised in distant missionary schools grew up to abandon their own children, LaFromboise says, and a spiral of devastation began.

"You can imagine the sterile setting," LaFromboise says. "It is not the same as growing up with your mother and father."

The children raised by grandparents reaped the benefits of growing up with those who practiced traditions privately at home, says Rod Goss, a 42-year-old Blackfeet grandma-baby.

"In the Indian way, you only learn by observing," he says.

Goss says he learned how to interact traditionally by watching the elders.

Blackfeet culture and language moves through family bonds that surpass decades of forbidden ceremonies.

And blood quantum, the stark remnant of the federal government's definition of Indian, won't prevent Blackfeet people from defining, in their families, memories and traditions, what it means to be an Indian.

"At ordinary times the eye concerns itself with such problems as Where? How far? How situated in relation to what? In the mescaline experience the implied questions to which the eye responds are of another order. Place and distance cease to be of much interest ..."

Aldous Huxley

A Spiritual Marathon

Story by
Tom Greene

Photos by
Stuart
Thurkill

Leader breaks the silence by asking Fireman to ready the ash. Fireman, a tall, easygoing Crow who now lives with the Northern Cheyenne, leaves the room without a word to retrieve a fire stick. Leader opens a shoebox-sized ornate wooden box, removes tobacco and tobacco leaves from among other artifacts used in the peyote meeting and passes it around the circle. He sits facing east behind a large altar raised a few inches above the ground.

In the center of the altar is a Chief Peyote, a large peyote "button" that belonged to Leader's father. The area surrounding the Chief Peyote on the altar is where ash will be arranged in a half moon shape, symbolic of man's passage through life. As the night wears on, Fireman will add to the ash until the crescent shape is complete. The crescent represents man's life cycle.

"The medicine," as they call it, is taken to help commune with the Creator and aid in the passage of time during the all-night meetings. The meetings are held infrequently, when members feel a need. Often

they are in a tepee, but tonight they're in a home.

The peyote meeting is a religious ceremony in which prayers are said and spiritual guidance is sought, but the long hours also teach patience and endurance. Meetings last from sundown to well past sunrise and participants are judged by just how still they sit. In the old days, leaving the tepee was not an option. Meetings are not as rigid these days, but by sitting motionless, unless singing or using the rattle or drum, participants prove themselves to the elders and to their Creator and also ensure a more intense feeling of rebirth when they emerge and walk blinking into a new day.

Cedarman, a grim middle-aged man dressed in denim and leather sitting to the right of Leader, is first in line. He rolls a smoke, his tongue snaking out from behind crooked teeth as he moistens his cigarette and then passes the tobacco. Sponsor, whose home is the site of tonight's peyote meeting, rolls the tobacco and passes it on past two sleepy young girls sitting cross-legged next to a wizened elder. The old

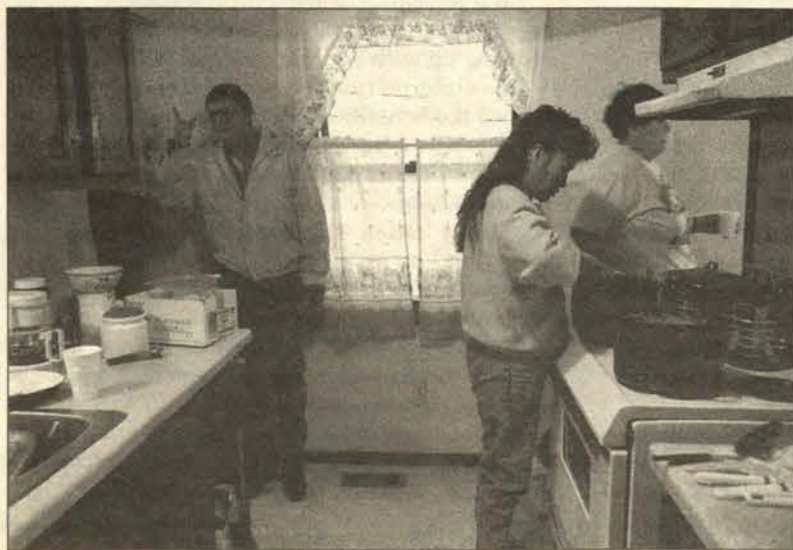
man's ancient face cracks into a thousand lines as he smiles at the girls, rolls a cigarette, and passes the tobacco to the thin-lipped man on his other side. The thin-lipped man is a bar-dache, a man in Cheyenne tradition who takes on the role of a woman. He takes some tobacco and a leaf to roll it in and passes it to the only woman

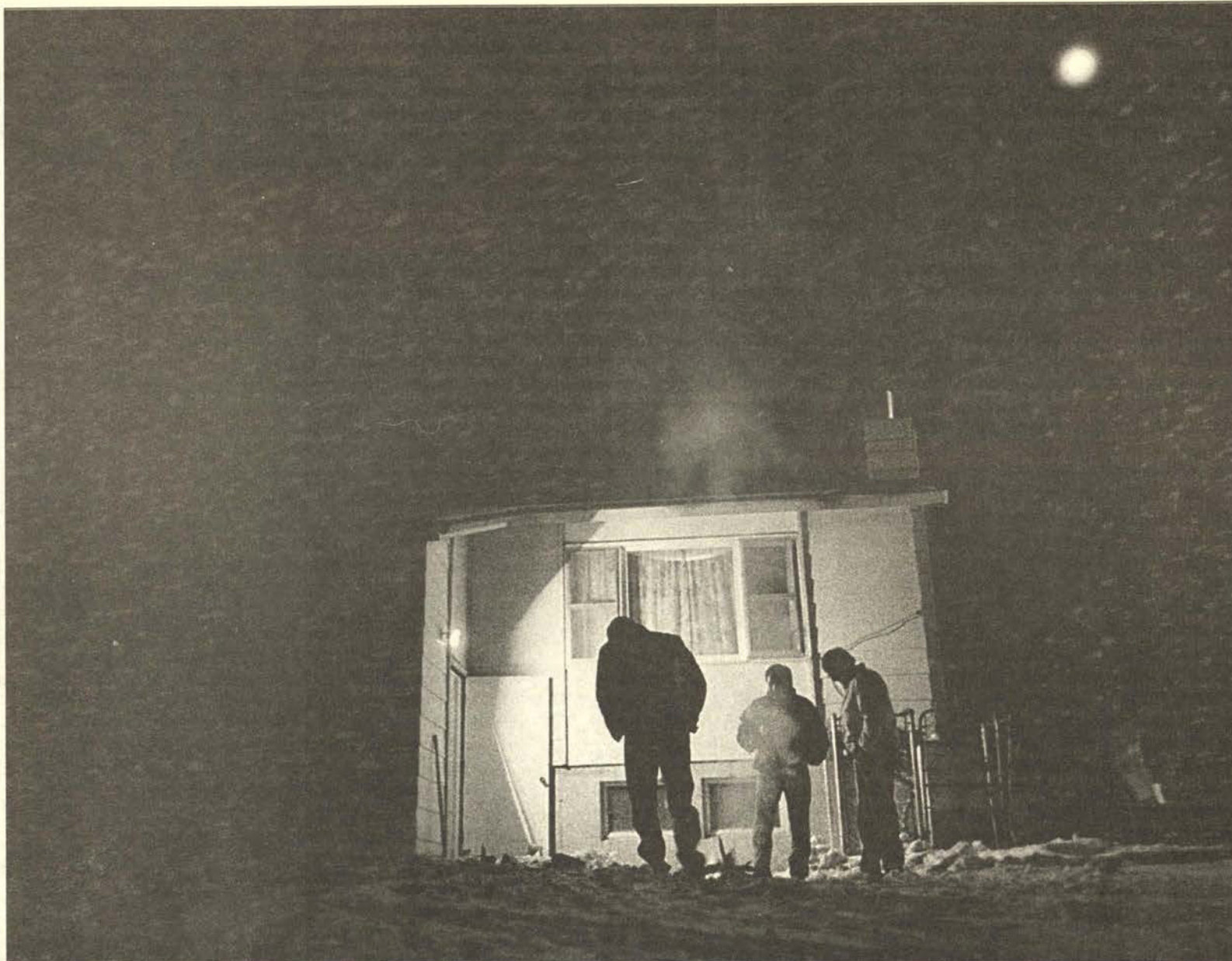
in the room. She is in her early 30s, and has wild, curly hair. A blue 8 is tattooed on the bridge between her eyes. She says afterward that the tattoo, a symbol of infinity, is a reminder of her "crazy days" before she returned to the Native American Church. The woman and the thin-lipped man each sit with their legs curled up underneath their bodies, painted shawls draped around their knees. The woman passes the tobacco to the shaking hands of her nephew. The 13-year-old wears an outfit of baggy jeans and an oversized T-shirt. The boy takes some tobacco and passes it along.

Fireman returns with a fire stick that he gives to Leader. Lighting his rolled tobacco with the burning embers, Leader begins a prayer and passes the fire stick for everyone to use to light their tobacco. The room fills with smoke and the sound of Leader's voice. After the tobacco is smoked, the cigarette butts are placed in the corners of the altar. Sage is passed around to be rubbed on hands and clothes as a blessing. Then Leader opens a mason jar filled with crushed peyote dust and passes it clockwise around the circle. Everyone takes a pinch of "the medicine," washing it down with the peyote tea that follows. The amount taken during the night is up to the participant. Anyone can motion for more to be passed their way. Leader nods approvingly as Drummer takes the peyote and then instructs Cedarman to sprinkle cedar on the fire to commence the singing.

They each reach their hands out to the smoke as the cedar sparks the ash. They inhale its aroma and draw the smoke to their heads, hearts and legs as another form of blessing. Drummer takes his place kneeling beside Leader and gives his kettle water drum a last check for tone by rolling the water around inside and expertly tapping the taught skin. He sips any excess water through the permeable skin and indicates that he is ready. Holding a rattle

A woman, who asked not to be identified, prepares the morning meal following an all-night peyote ceremony on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation.





Watched over by a full moon, Fireman, the keeper of the flames, and two other members of the Native American Church take a smoking break outside Charles Sooktis' house where the peyote ceremony is held. "The foundation of the peyote meeting is smoke. We are given healing from the Creator by the smoke from fire, tobacco, and cedar," Hugh Clubfoot says.

and a staff, Leader nods and Drummer strikes up a rapid beat using a quick dip of the drum to give the opening note a deep timbre. Leader's rattle follows Drummer's fast and steady beat and he begins to sing. The voices of the others join his. The thin-lipped man beats a fan furiously in front of his face, hiding the origin of a high-pitched voice that is in perfect harmony with Leader's deep pitch.

The songs are in Cheyenne with occasional English interspersed. In this ceremony they sing songs of general good health and celebrate the birthdays of some of Sponsor's family members, including one of the two girls who are both fast asleep already. Leader sings four songs. The rattle and staff are then passed down the circle and the next in line will pray aloud and then sing four songs. The drum is passed to those who are capable of keeping the fast pace that is required. Drummer beats for those who can't. Drummer's huge arms are bulging with exertion and sweat drips off his nose by the time Leader has finished his last song.

The peyote takes hold. Shadows from the fire flicker on the walls and the voices come together with more urgency. Meetings have no set time limit. The meeting is over when the medicine says it is over, usually sometime in the late morning.

Hallucinogen, medicine, drug, sacrament, it grabs everyone in the room

uniquely. All seem to go within themselves, slipping into a role carved out for them by their ancestors. Leader's focus pilots the group through the ceremony. When asked by Leader, Cedarman dusts the fire. He shows a rare gap-toothed grin when the sprinkled cedar crackles and pops before the circle of wide eyes. Fireman stokes the fire while Drummer pounds the water drum. With each beat, a trail of water from inside the drum is flung into the air. It hangs like a flyline cast by a master fisherman before falling back to the drum, where the droplets dance with every beat.

As a feeling of well-being spreads, eye-contact is accompanied by more frequent smiles. A sense of camaraderie grows. When the 13-year-old sings for the first time everyone is surprised at the authority in his deep voice. His uncle, Fireman, shares a proud glance with Leader. When the boy finishes singing, paternal grunts of approval are passed out instead of words.

At midnight, Leader sings "The Midnight Water Call." The woman leaves the room and returns with a pail of water. While she is gone Fireman carefully cleans the altar and floor. After pouring a little on the ground "for Mother Earth," the water, symbolic of the water of life, is passed around the circle. Leader then leaves the room to blow a sacred whistle to the four directions. Midnight signals a short recess when quiet conversation is allowed.

The singing resumes after the midnight water break. The peyote ceremony is about two-thirds singing with the rest spent in prayer or silence. It is silent when the first rays of dawn creep past the window tapestry. Leader asks the old man how many more rounds they should pass around the drum. After a long pause, the old man raises his head and holds up two fingers. Two more rounds take about three hours so many participants take another dose of peyote to stay awake.

They go around twice more, alternating prayer with song. A unifying spirit is evident by the time it comes full circle. All have an understanding that they have been part of a tradition, that they have shared an important experience together, a common bond.

Leader sings the "Dawn Song" and asks the woman to get the ceremonial breakfast. She sets up pails of food in a certain order: water, maize, fruit and meat, from the doorway to the altar. Then the meal is passed around and all quietly give their accounts of what the peyote revealed. Leader finishes with a prayer and says they should now take their new knowledge to the world with clean hearts and minds. As he sings the "Quitting Song," the ceremonial objects are carefully wrapped in silk handkerchiefs and put away and the people line up single file to walk outside and "welcome the sun."

Cheyenne Soul Searching

For some, peyote is a guide. Others embrace religions missionaries brought. One recently arrived sect hopes to teach new ways.

Story by
Tom Greene

Photos by
Stuart
Thurkill

It's hard to find an atheist in the small town of Lame Deer on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.

Downtown is a gas station, a trade store, two video stores and a florist. Funerals keep the florist busy. Most of the funerals are Catholic, but seven other denominations operate on the reservation as well. Six were brought to the reservation by white men and the other is the Native American Church, which was brought to the reservation in 1904 after arising among Plains tribes in the late 1880s. A highly personalized religion, whose main foundation is the peyote ceremony, it replaced the vision quests common among many Indian tribes.

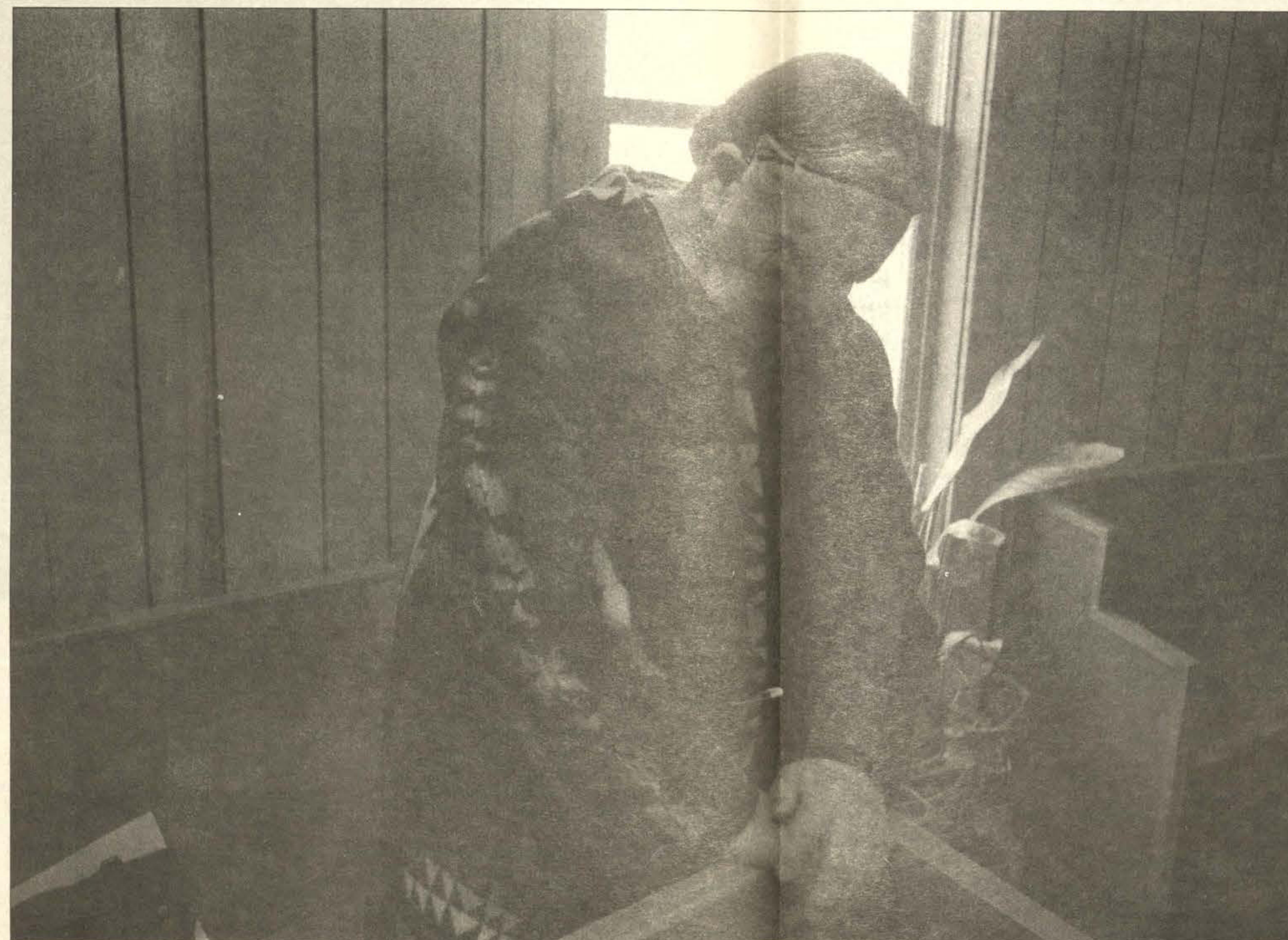
Many of its members call the Native American Church the only institutionalized religion that represents and preserves their native identity. And while some religions on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation have tried to adapt to Native American culture, others continue to press ahead with unbending belief that their ways are the only ways.

When Hugh Clubfoot left his home on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation to fight in Vietnam, his father pinned a peyote button above his heart. Referred to in the church as Chief Peyote, it is the unusually large root of a hallucinogenic cactus and it serves as the focal point of a peyote ceremony. It holds spiritual significance to followers of the Native American Church comparable to that of a crucifix for a Catholic. This Chief Peyote was an heirloom that had belonged to Clubfoot's father, but to the U.S. Army it was an illegal drug, Clubfoot says, and its discovery would have meant a dishonorable discharge and possible imprisonment. Clubfoot kept his father's keepsake pinned above his heart, but concealed under his uniform.

"I brought it out and prayed when I needed to," says Clubfoot. "Chief Peyote kept me safe from my enemy's bullets. Chief Peyote brought me back home whole."

Clubfoot did his tour of duty in Vietnam and returned home to his father. When he tried to give the peyote back, his father shook his head and told him it was his. He told him he had earned it.

Clubfoot keeps the Chief Peyote in a special box these days. He says he brought it out many times when he struggled with an alcohol prob-



lem. Now he brings it out when he is asked to lead a peyote meeting.

Vern Sooktis, who is both a Sun Dance priest and a member of the Native American Church, recalls how his family viewed religion.

"We were exposed to all the religions and chose what we wanted to do," he says. Sooktis says the Northern Cheyenne make little distinction between their spirituality and their daily life. For them, belief in God is as natural as breathing.

"We were all baptized Catholic," Sooktis says. "We went to school, did our chores, washed the dishes and then had Bible study from 8 to 9. In the summer, we had peyote meetings and Sun Dances. When we grew up

we each took different routes. One of my sisters is a Quaker, one a Baptist, my brother goes to peyote meetings and I'm a Sun Dance priest. I didn't decide it, it was decided for me by the creator."

Sooktis crosses his legs casually and smokes a cigarette. It is the day after he attended an all-night peyote meeting led by Clubfoot, and as he speaks his red eyes occasionally turn toward sights outside the window. He is visiting with his father in the house where the meeting was held. His father, who is 76, nods off next to him on a sofa.

Sooktis says that his role as a Sun Dance priest carries no weight in the peyote meeting. He explains that the Native American Church

is a separate entity that revolves around taking "the medicine" and being a member can sometimes mean bearing a stigma. It rarely happens, he says, but he acknowledges peyote has been abused.

"There are some people out there who don't know what it is," Sooktis says of the peyote ritual. "They take it for the wrong reasons. They take it for a drug."

Sooktis says peyote has been criticized as being a new practice that does not have the tradition of the ceremonial sweats and Sun Dances. The Sun Dance ceremony has a history as old as the Northern Cheyenne and is fundamental to their culture, unlike the peyote ceremony whose newer Native American

Church members are required by law to carry a card in order to participate.

Usually held in the summer, the Sun Dance can attract thousands of people and involves prayer and song over a four-day period. Participants fast, avoiding even water, and will pierce themselves as part of the ritual of purification. Although some people at the Sun Dance take peyote, it is not part of the ceremony. Peyote is a sacrament distinct to the Native American Church. Sooktis says that peyote is misunderstood and that "I can't tell you about my religion unless you participate — it's really your own experience."

Some religious denominations criticize Northern Cheyenne practices that have been in

place for years and, Sooktis says, condemn what they don't try to understand. He says detractors have falsely denounced peyote as a Mexican religion adopted by Native Americans and claim peyote is a new cult lacking Native American roots.

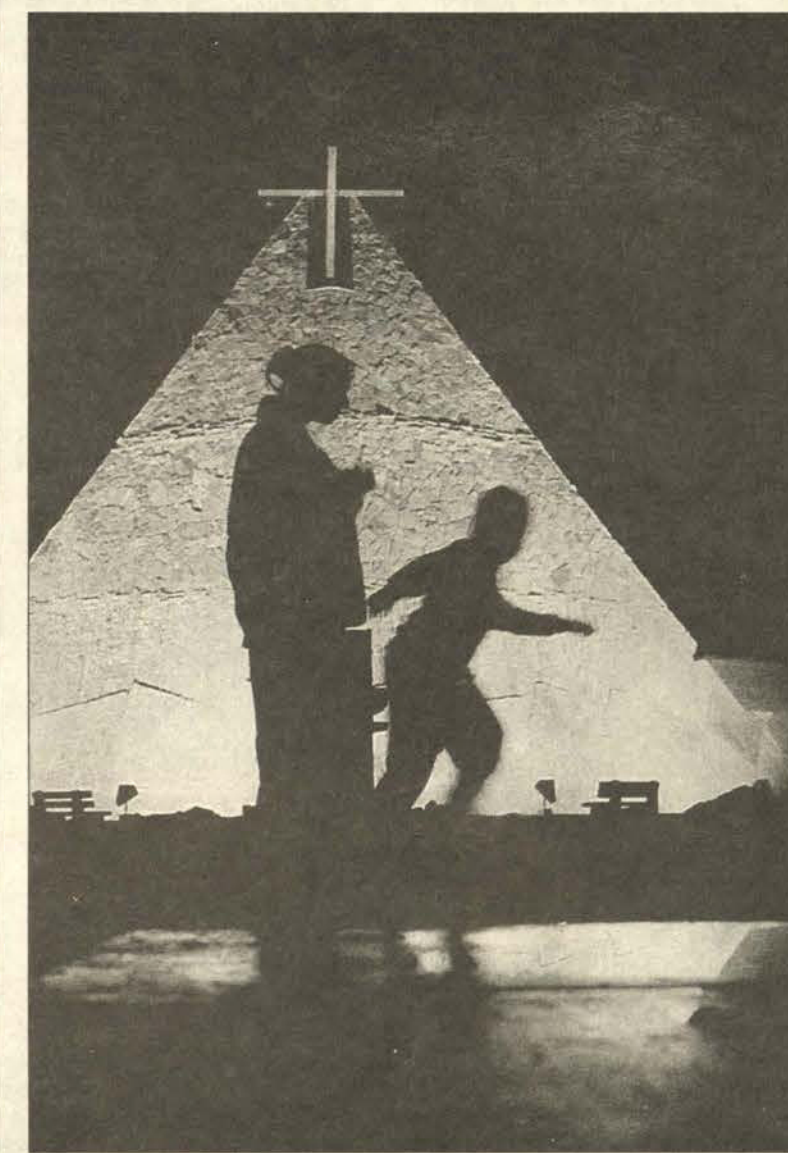
"But ask that old man how long he has been taking peyote," says Sooktis pointing to his father who has quietly awakened.

"Oh, just about 70 years," says his father with a mischievous smile before closing his eyes again.

The most recent addition to the company of denominations on the reservation is a Southern Baptist Church run from a trailer. The trailer sits among tall weeds and worn



Left: The Rev. Dan Crosby, who has been a priest on the Northern Cheyenne for 14 years, leaves Agnes Limpy at her home after Mass in Busby. "She insists on going to church even when it is muddy," Crosby says.



Far Left: Agnes Limpy prays in the Busby Catholic Church. The use of cedar smoke, prayers to the four directions, and a traditional prayer in Northern Cheyenne at the end of Mass are all signs of the blending of Catholic and Northern Cheyenne beliefs. Left: Youth from Lame Deer play tag outside St. Labre Catholic Church in Ashland during a wake for a relative. Crucifixes dangling from their necks, they climbed the church until scolded by an elder.

“

*I'm here as
much for my
own salvation
as for theirs.*

The Rev.
Dan Crosby

”

can't distinguish between any religion.”

Cindy Wilmont hurries in and out of their house nervously as her husband works. A man from the reservation, who could be any age from 30 to 50, silently watches Wilmont as he spins a wheel to expose a lug nut. Cindy Wilmont finally decides to stay outside and pull her 4-year-old boy around the

houses on the outskirts of Lame Deer. Preacher Harold Wilmont says he and his wife, Cindy, opened it six months earlier because “nobody else was going to do it.” Wilmont works full time as a coal miner to support their fledgling church, but says they are in a constant struggle to hold on to what they have since “they (Northern Cheyenne neighbors) will steal just about anything they can.”

“And you can't go to the cops because everyone here is related,” says Wilmont.

He says the church expects to receive financial help in July from Southern Baptists in Florida to help build a stable house of worship. The spot where it will be erected lies in the shade of an abandoned Catholic Church.

“Like everything else, it's been up and down since we started,” says Wilmont in a non-sense voice as he changes the tire on a beat-up van in the front yard.

“Denominations don't mean much to them. The Indians

yard on a wagon.

“They're a real spiritual people as far as God goes,” Wilmont says. “But they go on emotion more than they do facts. Going on emotion is bad because if you eat too much sugar or something and get upset you can just lose it. They'll just get up and leave when they get upset. Being there's no jobs or bases, they just kind of move around.”

Wilmont stands up and violently jerks the jack out from under the van. It slams back to earth, causing his son to clap his hands with laughter and Cindy Wilmont to jump back. The man from the reservation slowly walks around the van and gets in the driver's seat without a word.

“This guy here,” says Wilmont, indicating the man from the reservation who has started driving the van down the long driveway. “He has got a job now but he's an alcoholic and can't keep a job. He gets fired every six to eight weeks.”

The van cruises down to the main road, stops to pick up a woman who had walked up from a neighboring house, turns around and comes back up the driveway. Wilmont says that he and his wife will let their neighbors take showers at their house, give them food and even pay the occasional heat bill if a family is really in need. Cindy Wilmont explains she helps them one at a time and hopes it does some good but she says, “Sometimes I wonder...”

“We are trying to teach them to work for what they get,” says Wilmont as he watches the van repeatedly drive up and down the driveway. “They are used to it the other way around.”

Wilmont says that by bringing Jesus Christ into the lives of those on the reservation he hopes to get them away from alcohol and drugs. He says that he respects them trying to hold on to their identity, but that many of them live in the past and “it's hard to eat that.”

“Yeah, they say ‘Oh, we want to go back to the old ways,’” says Cindy Wilmont in a hushed voice. “Everything is ‘the old way.’ But most of these people don't know what ‘the old way’ is. If they did they wouldn't want to go back to it. It's something they are hanging on to that doesn't make any sense.”

She shrugs and gives her son another tug around the yard. Wilmont wipes his hands on an oily rag as he watches the van continue to repeat its loop from the top of the driveway, around the house, and back to the driveway several more times.

“Since there's no economy, it's hard to get a mainline church down here,” says Wilmont. “The Catholics moved out, so what does that tell you.”

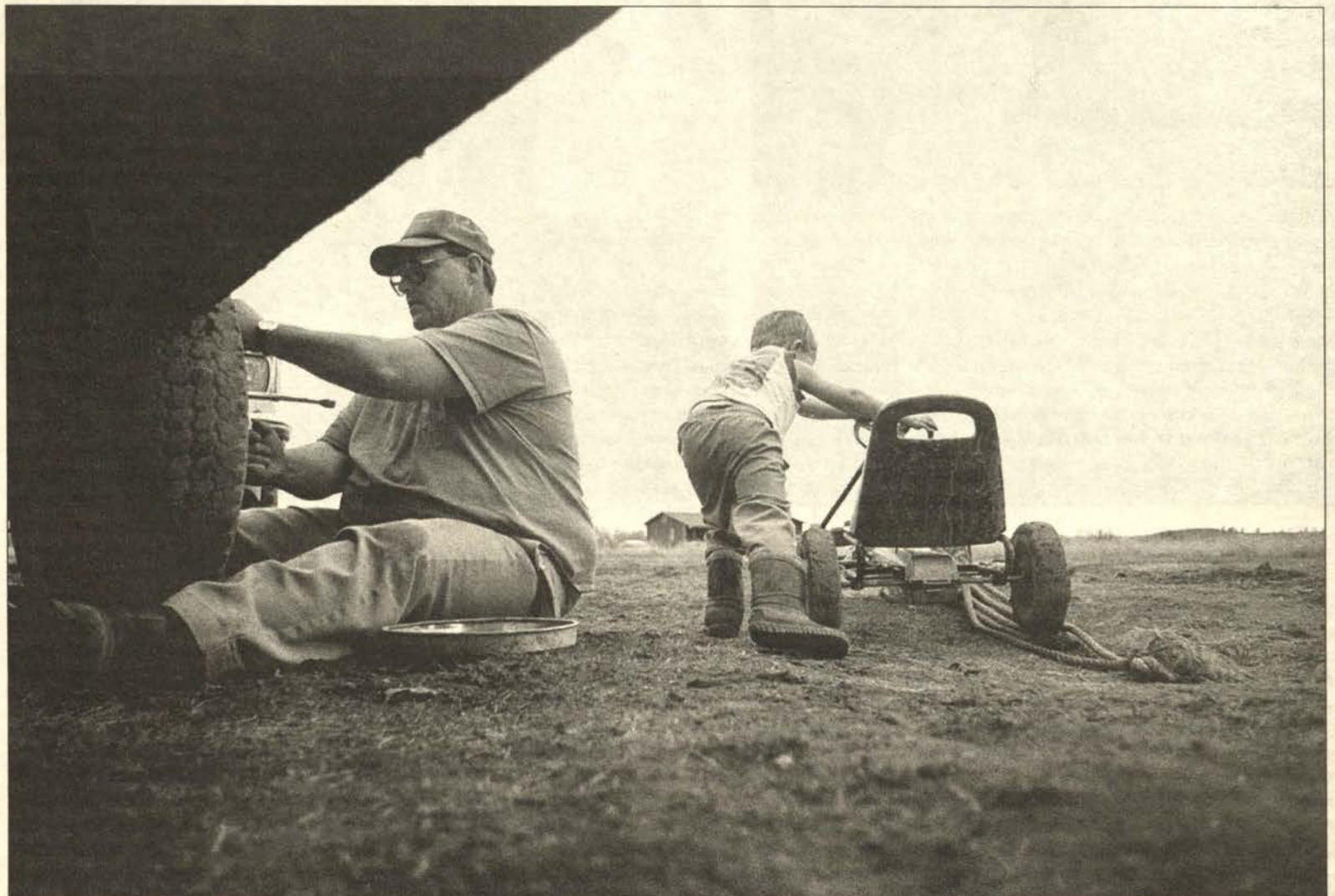
Cindy Wilmont puts a halt to the wagon ride to stand and watch with her husband as the van goes up and down.

“Just what in the heck are they doing?” she asks.

“I just don't know,” Wilmont answers with a confused look on his face.

The Catholics didn't move out — they just relocated to the middle of town. The Rev. Dan Crosby is the man in charge of the Catholic Church in Lame Deer. He has lived on the reservation for 14 years and just

Harold Wilmont changes a tire on the church van while his 4-year-old son plays nearby. The Southern Baptist Church in Birney is run by Wilmont and his wife, Cindy.





Children play in the ashes that kept the peyote ceremony going just hours before. The ashes from the fire are arranged into a gradual half moon through the night, representing the nine moons during which a woman carries a child. At the end of the evening a woman brings in the water of life.

about everyone there knows Father Dan. On Sundays he says Mass in Lame Deer before driving over to Busby to celebrate another Mass, topping out at speeds in excess of 80 mph. When he slows down a little after he picks up an elderly woman who can't make it to Sunday Mass from her rural house he nearly gets mired in the mud. But Crosby is a man who gets things done one way or the other and eventually gets them both to church on time.

The entrance to his church faces east, in the way a tepee does in a Sun Dance or peyote ceremony. He opens each Mass with a prayer to the four directions. A crucifix of Jesus with Native American features hangs on the wall and the main altar is draped with a shawl from a powwow.

"In the past it would be bending the rules," says Crosby after Mass. "But it's not an aberration at all. It is to help them see that Jesus is for everyone and for every culture. You integrate the Catholic aspects with core beliefs. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that Jesus is in your life."

Crosby is a realist. The trappings of Western culture are just that, he says, hollow trappings that have accumulated over

the years and serve no purpose. He strives to make his Church relevant to the people it serves and, in doing so, has blurred the typical Catholic image into one that is more accessible to the Northern Cheyenne people. He says that an arrogant Catholic Church has burned Native Americans in the past and he doesn't blame them for turning their backs on it now.

"People leave (the church), and that can be authentic, but it can also be a veiled or not-so-veiled form of retaliation," says Crosby. "They'll say 'We don't need you, jerk, you've done enough already. We used to think we couldn't get along without you, but now we know we can.'"

Crosby frequently goes to sweat ceremonies, sometimes accompanied by a local nun. He says he is willing to participate in just about every ceremony on the reservation except peyote. In the 1960s some Catholic priests ate peyote, he says, but he shuns it because it is a hallucinogen. Crosby sees the Native American Church that has evolved around peyote as a form of institutionalizing Native American spirituality. Even though Crosby won't eat peyote, he is quick to say that he doesn't con-

demn it or any religion just because it is different.

"I'm Irish and the English did the same thing to us," says Crosby. "There is a verse to an old Irish song that says, 'The English came and scorned us for who we are.'"

Father Dan Crosby will never sit in on one of Hugh Clubfoot's peyote meetings. Although Clubfoot says he would be happy to accommodate him, Crosby says he must set his own limits. And Clubfoot says that in the end it doesn't really matter since they pray to the same God anyway. Crosby hopes those who take peyote include him in their prayers because he believes their prayers are real.

"Why am I here? I believe in Jesus and have much to share with the people," says Crosby. "But I'm here because the land and the people have a way of getting inside you. The hills are home — the people are home. It helps me be authentically who I am. On the reservation you have to be real. You're dealing with raw good and evil and if you wear masks the people will discover that."

"I'm here as much for my own salvation as for theirs."

An Uneasy Education

Indians who leave home for college find the task a challenge. Returning to the reservation is no simple matter either.

Story by
**Thomas
Mullen**

Photos by
**Karl
Vester**

Lris Heavy Runner got an education at the University of Kansas. But it wasn't what she expected.

All her life Heavy Runner had been around Indian people. A Blackfeet with a disarming smile and cascade of shiny black hair, Heavy Runner was raised in Browning and spent two years at a Native American junior college. But when she got to Lawrence, Kan., she found herself in an alien environment. She didn't understand the way students and professors thought. And especially how they spoke.

Nobody in Browning used two-dollar words or scientific-sounding terms. Everybody in Lawrence seemed to. And, she says, everyone but her seemed to understand. Gradually, though, Heavy Runner found her way.

"My language started changing," Heavy Runner recalls, eyes beaming behind round glasses that frame her round face. "I started understanding more English and I could write it."

But that new way raised questions for her about her old ways.

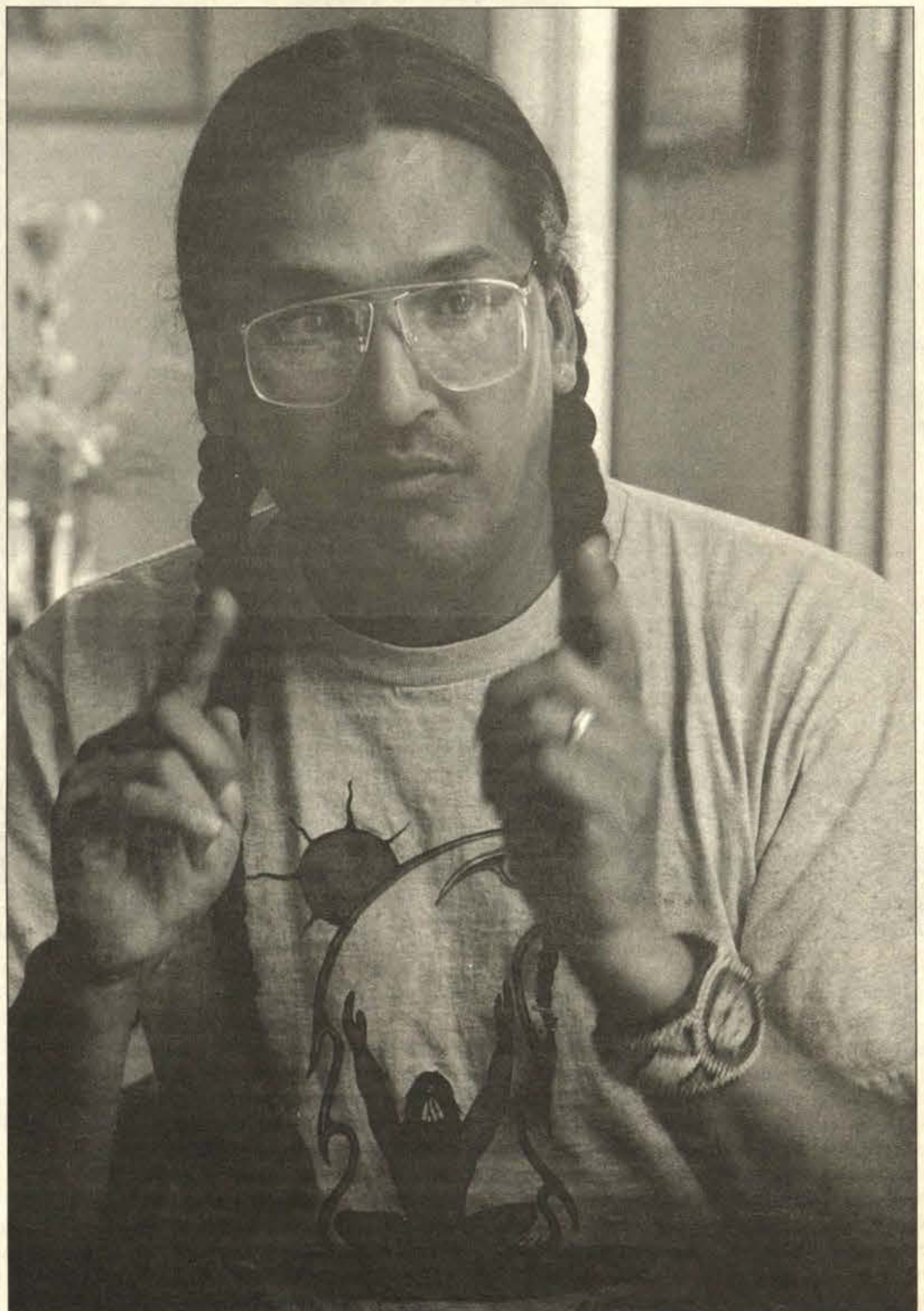
"I had learned how it worked and I started wondering, 'Should I be doing this?'" she says.

She wanted to return after graduation to the 1.5 million-acre Blackfeet Reservation that lies along the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains in northcentral Montana. She worried how she should speak back home. Would her friends say she was trying to act as if she were better than they were? Would they say she was talking like a white girl?

Heavy Runner knows these same questions are being asked by hundreds of other Indian college students; she deals with those students regularly.

As an adjunct professor in UM's Native American Studies program, she routinely helps Indian students cope not only with academic rigors, but often with what she calls a college-induced identity crisis.

For Indian students attending college, maintaining their identities in a culturally diverse setting can be education's biggest challenge. Those who learn to live in two worlds represent perhaps their tribe's best assets in their reservations' struggle for



Jim Kipp is majoring in Native American Studies at The University of Montana nearly 20 years after his first attempt at college failed. His wife, Billie Jo, is a Ph.D. candidate in psychology.

improvement and economic growth.

But Native Americans who have proven themselves in university classrooms often come home to find they must prove themselves to their own people. A four-year stay in college can culminate in American Indian graduates returning home to people who no longer relate to them.

Heavy Runner remembers the frustration.

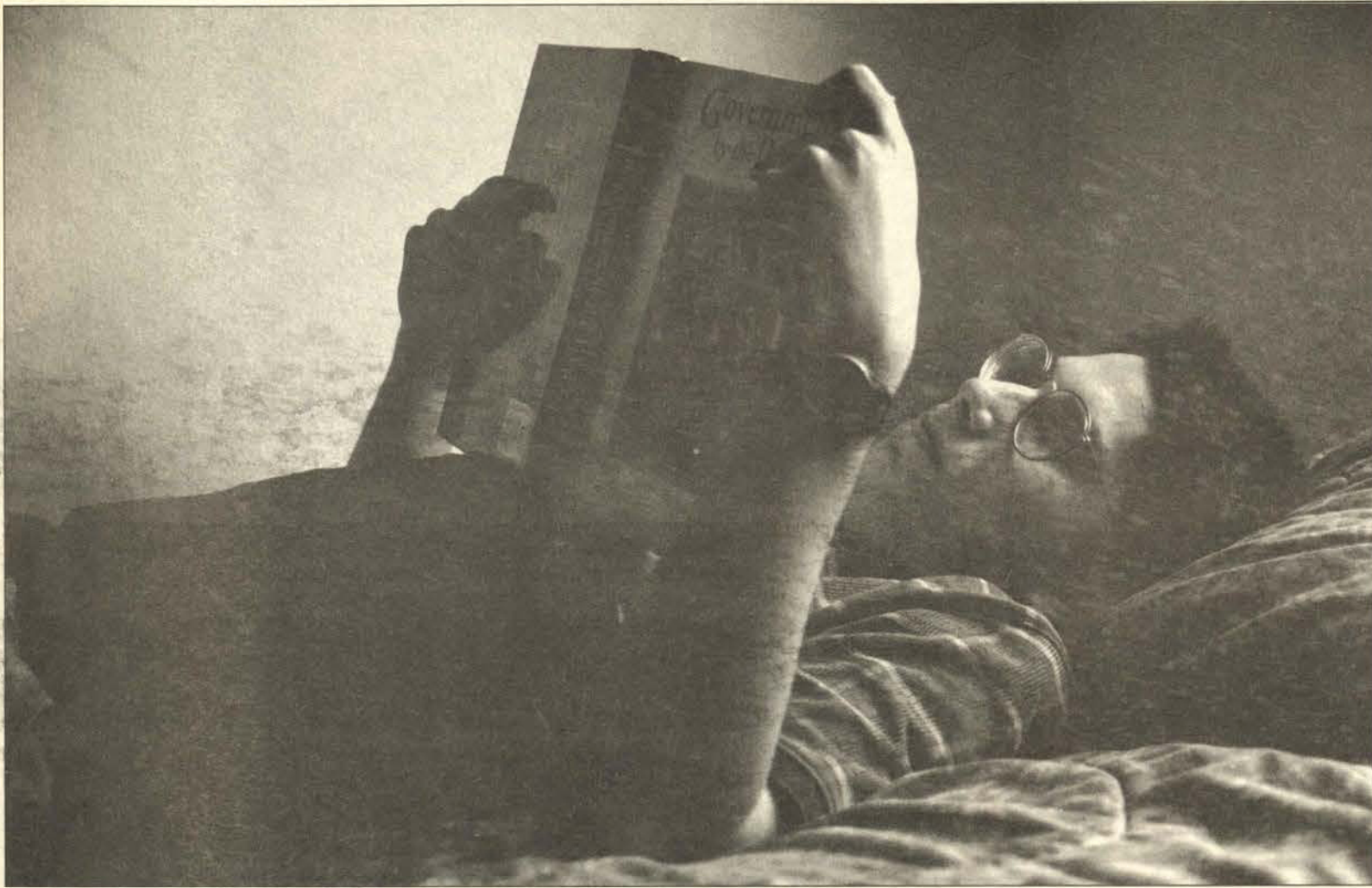
"Here's the dilemma," she says. "My family, my grandmother, told me all my

life, 'Get an education, but don't change.'

"Impossible!" she says, leaning forward in her chair as her eyes show her exasperation.

Change has been the definition of Billie Jo Kipp's college career.

Four years ago, Kipp was 36 and just a year removed from drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Stuck in a dead-end job in her hometown of Browning, Kipp decided she wanted more, and moved to Great Falls to



Robert Juneau, 22, was raised in Browning and is now studying history and political science at The University of Montana. His uncle, Wayne, graduated from the University of California-Berkeley and encourages Bob to finish his degree. "In order for us as Indian people to become equal in every aspect of life, we need an education," Wayne says.

pursue her education.

While her husband remained in Browning to run a business and her oldest son stayed to play basketball, Kipp attended the University of Great Falls, living with her three younger children in family housing there.

"We lived very poor," Kipp recalls. "It was the hardest time of my life."

Despite this, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in counseling psychology, and now at age 40 is a Ph.D. candidate in psychology at the University of Montana.

Kipp's undergraduate experience gave her a new-found confidence, but was also the breeding ground for one of her biggest fears — the fear of losing who she is.

"You change too much and you lose your connection with home," Kipp says.

"My goal is to come back home, (but) to come back and not know what's going on and not be connected is really scary for me."

Kipp's family has joined her in Missoula, where her husband is a senior in Native American Studies. That renewed closeness is a comfort but she relies on frequent trips to see her mother in Browning for a connection to her roots. Even there, however, Kipp is reminded of the differences between herself and many on the reservation.

"When I'm at the university, I have to speak with a certain terminology and do things the way I'm being taught to do them," Kipp says. "When I come home and talk to my mom, she tells me, 'Don't use those words here. Don't talk like that here.'"

She knows it's an attitude she will have

to deal with when she returns home to work.

So does Marsha Last Star.

She worked at the tribal court in Browning for 13 years before earning a degree in social work from UM. Now a first-year law student in Missoula, Last Star says many former coworkers see her education as a threat more than a benefit.

"We could make some big changes here if people would look at educated people and say, 'Where could they help? Let's use this knowledge.' But it doesn't happen that way," Last Star says.

Both Kipp and Last Star agree that it's easy to understand the indifference to their education. Throughout their years in the classroom, they have become outsiders.

"You've been gone and you don't know what it's like any more," Kipp says. "You've been disconnected, and the people here have been through everything year after year, and they have a right to what they have here."

A college education remains a relative rarity for Indian people. The last census shows that while more than 75 percent of non-Indians in Montana have at least a high school diploma, only 3 percent of Indians do. And the dropout rate at Browning High School in the 1995-96 school year was 16.6 percent — almost three times the state average.

For those college students who return to the reservation to work, success can be a touchy combination of patience and tact. Back in Browning over spring break, Kipp says she's begun to accept that her reintegration into the Blackfeet tribe may be as

demanding a process as getting her education was.

"Eventually I can come back and begin to meld again with the people here and become a part of the community," Kipp says. "But I've got to earn that."

"It's not like I can come back with all these ideas and say, 'OK, you guys gotta do this.' I'll be put in my place very quickly."

That's if she can find a job at all. Unemployment in Glacier County, which has a population of close to 60 percent Blackfeet, was 16 percent in March. The state Labor Department reports that's the highest jobless rate of any county in Montana, where the statewide average is about 5 percent. The real rate on the Blackfeet is probably much higher, as it is on the state's other reservations. This rate counts only those who are actively seeking work.

When jobs are available, the overwhelming source of employment opportunities for college graduates are government jobs in health services, social work, education or tribal government.

But a lack of jobs isn't the only obstacle facing returning college graduates in Browning, says Blackfeet Tribal Judge Howard Doore.

While he prizes and encourages education, he says the plain fact remains that many college students are still distrusted on the reservation.

"It all depends on how they act," says Doore, whose daughter Adra attends the University of Idaho. "Some speak from the mouth and not the heart, and some have a chip on their shoulder from

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I had learned how it worked and I started wondering, 'Should I be doing this?'

Iris Heavy Runner

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"I think people (on the reservation) are intimidated by educated people who come back and try to get a job," Marsha Last Star says.

college."

Conrad LaFromboise, director of the Blackfeet Higher Education Program, says college graduates who return to the reservation are up against a mentality that often shuns change — and those who bring it. The result, he says, is that Indian students are often at a disadvantage when coming home for a job.

LaFromboise says reservation residents accept the idea that education is important and a college degree is desirable.

"But you've still got a lot of people who look after their own here and if they need



"Here's the dilemma," says Iris Heavy Runner. "My family, my grandmother, told me all my life, 'Get an education, but don't change.'"

a job, they get it — even if they may not have the skills," he says.

He says hiring on reservations is not unlike the political "crony" system common in early-day politics. While the western world today frowns on such hiring practices, he says it's all part of the Indian code.

"A long time ago, when Indian people traveled in bands, leaders of those bands looked out for those in their group," LaFromboise says. "You've still got a lot of that sentiment around."

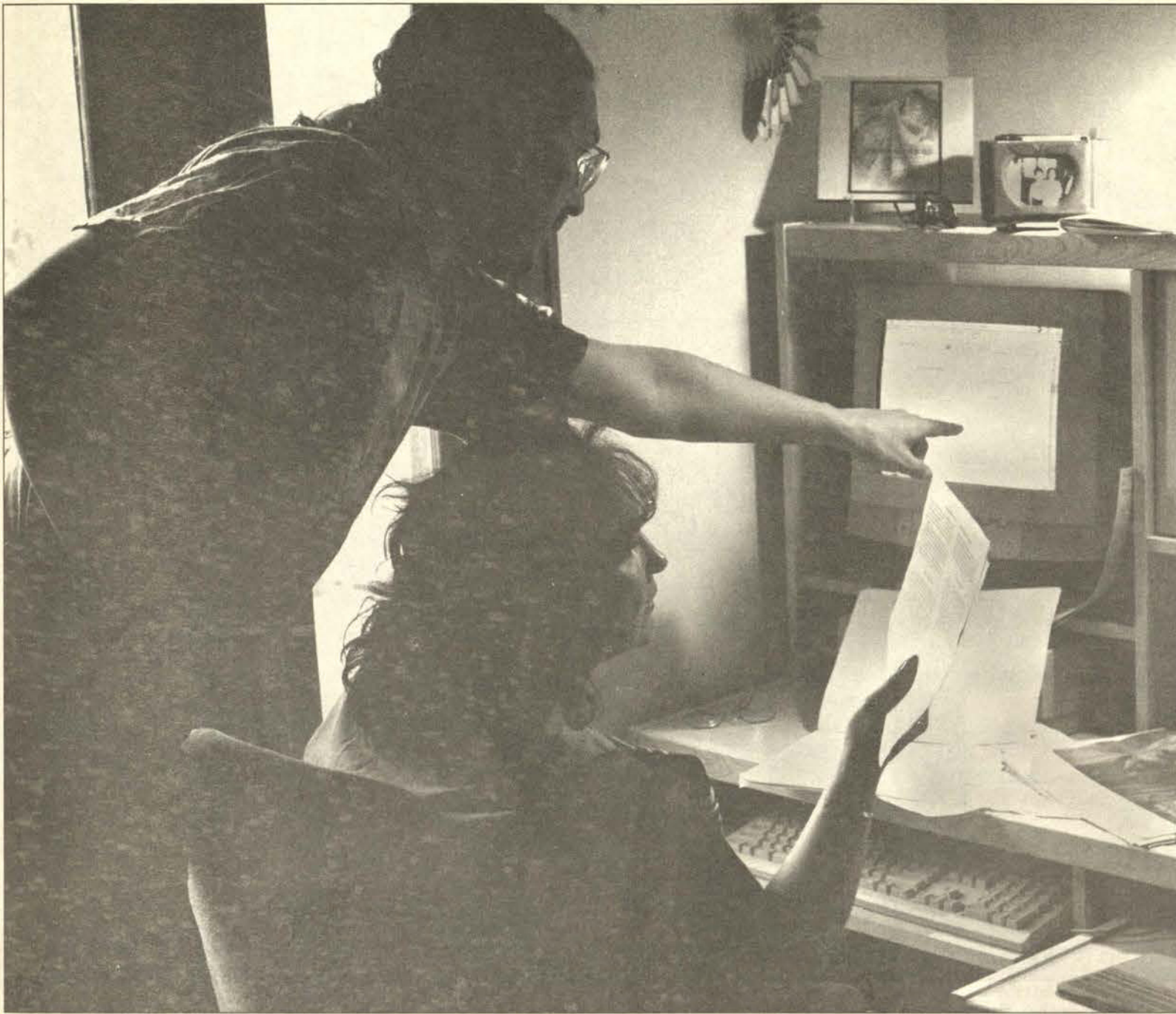
Jolene Weatherwax probably wasn't

hurt by this sentiment. After graduating from Browning High School, she rose to become the director of ambulance services for a Browning medical service with only a high school education — a climb not uncommon in reservation life. She says it wasn't hard.

"They'd just put a job in front of me and I'd get it done," she says.

She says when people return to the reservation waving master's degrees and calling for change, they threaten to disrupt the way things work on the reservation.

Now 42, Weatherwax is in her second



With a little help from her husband, Jim, Billie Jo Kipp works on her psychology thesis at her home in Missoula. A graduate student, Kipp is farther down the educational path than her husband, but yields to him when tradition is involved. "On the reservation, I put my husband first because that's the way it is. When he's in ceremony, he's first," Kipp says. "But (at school) I'm pretty much first because I'm ahead of him in my process."

year at Montana State University in Bozeman, where she majors in psychology. She says she knows she has a fine line to walk if she returns to the reservation to work.

"If you go home and point at your degree and say, 'This piece of paper says you have to listen to me,' nobody's going to listen to you," Weatherwax says.

Melvina Malatare, 49, has worked in Browning since she finished school at UM in 1989. She has been the director of the Pikuni Family Healing Clinic there since November, and remembers the trials of returning to work on the reservation.

"When I first started working there weren't too many people there who had degrees or as much education as I did and sometimes I tried to hide it," Malatare says. "I didn't have to change the way I talked or anything but I just wanted to be one of the group and I didn't feel I needed to flaunt (my education)."

Her success, she says, has been a product of a positive attitude that has seen her through a divorce, a burned home and the

loss of her son in 1996 in an alcohol-related car crash. That quality, she says, is coupled with a willingness to compromise — both attributes she claims to have acquired in college. Though a still unwritten paper keeps her from her degree in social work, Malatare says she is a different person because of her years at UM.

"I know who I am and I didn't before (college)," she says. "I have beliefs and values and I stick to them, but I am also subject to change my beliefs and am not rigid in having my way or no way."

Despite the difficulties, getting an education is key for today's Indians, says Wayne Juneau, the director of an alcohol and drug treatment center in Heart Butte on the reservation.

Juneau remembers how as a 24-year-old graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, he went to Washington, D.C., to work as a lobbyist for Indian affairs where he met a fellow Blackfeet woman who taught him the ins and outs of the city's political machinery.

The insight came with strict instruc-

tions that he pick someone from his tribe and teach them what he knows.

"That's the way it is in the tribe: those who know help," Juneau says.

He says tuition fee waivers for qualified Indians and tribal community colleges on each of the seven Montana reservations have given Native American students increased access to education. He says it is an institution Indian people can no longer afford to view coolly.

"In order for us as Indian people to become equal in every aspect of life we need an education," he says.

Perhaps fittingly, Iris Heavy Runner has a more traditional answer. Education is like a blizzard, she says.

"We have to pay attention to what our ancestors told us about the buffalo," Heavy Runner says. "The buffalo never run away from a blizzard because they know if they did it would follow them and the chances are they wouldn't make it."

"So, as students, we have to be like those buffalo. We have to put our head down and go right for that blizzard."



Since Cheryl Smoker moved with her mother and children to Missoula she says the sacrifice is exposing her kids to urban life "without the comfort of family." The mantel in their small apartment tells stories of their lives and the uniqueness of their culture.

Pride and prejudice

Many Native Americans are accustomed to the security and comfort of living with their own people. In a new place, prejudices and stereotypes often emerge.

Story by
Katie Oyan

Photos by
Amy Zekos

Twelve-year-old Mandi Henderson likes Washington Middle School because of the opportunities it yields, like being able to play the cello in the school's orchestra.

What she says she doesn't like is being called a "dirty Indian" and a "prairie nigger," and told that she doesn't "belong on this Earth."

She moved to Missoula from the Blackfeet Reservation two years ago, and what Mandi says she misses most is "being around people that are like me."

"There's more stuff to do here," she says. "But I don't get treated bad in Browning."

Whether it's in-your-face name calling or more subtle forms of discrimination encountered when trying to rent a house or get a loan, Montana's Native Americans, who comprise more than 6 percent of the state's population, routinely suffer the humiliation of racism.

Mandi's mother, Glenda Gilham, will graduate from the University of Montana with a degree in social anthropology this spring. Like her daughter, Gilham has few non-Indian friends in Missoula. She feels comfortable going anywhere she wants on the reservation, but she and her two daughters don't go out on the town much in Missoula; they rarely go to movies or out to dinner because of discrimination they say pervades much of the city.

"It's subtle things — how we get looked at and spoken to, or not spoken to," she says. "Sometimes we just get outright ignored."

"We feel alone and apart from society in Missoula. I never realized how bad it was until I had to leave my comfort zone."

Gilham and other members of Missoula's Indian community feel that business owners, especially, label them with stereotypes. They say that clerks watch Indians because they believe they are more likely to shoplift.



Since urban life has brought racism into the daily lives of Glenda Gilham and her two youngest children, they tend to spend a lot of time at home. Lately, outside of her classes at the University of Montana, Gilham has spent most of her time doing detailed beadwork.

Janet Robideaux, an organizer at Missoula's Indian People's Action, says:

"Nobody looks at me and says, 'I bet that she has a master's degree in psychology.' They look at me like I'm going to take something. They see brown skin."

Gilham has the same reaction. "When we go shopping somewhere, why do they follow us so much?" she asks. "We contribute a lot to these communities in Montana. Nobody stays home when they get paid, they all head out and blow their money, but yet we're treated so low."

While shopping at J.C. Penney in Missoula's Southgate Mall about a year ago, former Big Pine Paiute tribal chairwoman Cheryl Smoker says a clerk asked her, "Can you really afford this?"

Rob Kruckenberg has been the manager at J.C. Penney since February, and he says there have been no discrimination complaints during that time.

"We don't discriminate in terms of employment or service on race, creed, religion, you name it," Kruckenberg says. "We have a strong anti-discrimination policy, and all our employees go through anti-discrimination training."

Gilham says her encounters with racism are not confined to Missoula. Three years ago she tried to rent a motel room in Great Falls. The vacancy sign was on, she says, but when she went inside, the woman at the counter told her no rooms were available. Her husband, Oren, who is half Blackfeet and Cree and half Irish descent and is more non-Indian in appearance, went into the motel immediately after Gilham was rejected. The clerk rented him a room.

That's not unusual, Native Americans report, though few confront those they say offend them. Cheryl Smoker has.

Smoker moved to Missoula from the Big Pine Reservation in California more than

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Glenda Gilham

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three years ago with her two daughters, Kree, 7, and Kylee, 14, and her mother. They say that since the move they have encountered discrimination not only at businesses, but also at a school and from police officers.

Smoker says Washington Middle School ignored her family's cultural values during a period when Kylee was very ill. She says the school excused absences when Kylee went to see a doctor and was hospitalized, but would not excuse absences to let her see a traditional healer. According to Smoker, a school counselor told her that since Kylee already had too many absences, Smoker would be prosecuted for taking her daughter out of class to see a healer.

But a Washington School counselor

expressed surprise at those allegations.

"I can't imagine that would be the case," says Carol Marino.

Marino says such absences are normally considered medical appointments, and as long as a parent calls or sends a note, the child will be excused.

"But there are kids who miss a lot of school that we watch very carefully," she says.

Never having lived off the reservation before, Kylee had difficulty adjusting. In addition to problems with her school, during her first year in Missoula, Kylee, who normally dresses in Nike clothes and baggy pants, says she was stopped by a police officer and asked what gang she belonged to.

The incident occurred at about 8 p.m. one night a couple of years ago, Kylee says, while she was playing basketball with some Native American friends at a neighborhood court. Kylee says the policeman stopped and asked them what gang they belonged to and whether they were "going to rob again." Kylee and her friends denied being part of a gang, and the officer left, she says.

"They didn't have any proof," Kylee says. "I felt really insulted."

Kylee and her mother, and several people who spoke at a recent meeting between the city police and the Indian People's Action (IPA) allege Native American youths have been targeted by cops as being gang members.

Missoula Police Chief Pete Lawrenson says he believes the complaints made at the meeting were not entirely unfounded, but he doesn't think his officers intentionally discriminate against anyone.

"Kids and cops always have an adversarial role, whether they're Native American or any ethnic group," Lawrenson says. "We have to be extremely aware of how easy it is to be discriminatory against young people in

Kree Smoker, 7, shows off the sash and crown she won for being the best traditional powwow dancer in her age group.



general, regardless of ethnicity."

Part of the problem, IPA members say, is that there are no Indians on the Missoula police force.

Gale Albert, head of recruitment for the Missoula police department, says there is no discrimination in the process of hiring officers, but few minorities show up for testing.

Many Native Americans are hesitant to apply for municipal and police positions because they don't feel they have a chance, according to Ken Toole, program director of the Montana Human Rights Network. Toole feels this is due to low self-esteem that comes from a lifetime of rejection and discrimination. Also, Toole says that Native Americans receive the message that people in city positions are among those who discriminate against them, and "Who wants to work with people who have stereotypes?"

Albert says Native Americans have no basis for such assumptions. However, Robideaux says, "the word on the street is if you're Indian, don't bother applying."

According to Lawrenson, the Missoula Police Department is serious about recruitment efforts and bridging the gap between the force and the Native American community.

"We're not just blowing smoke at them," Lawrenson says. "We're as serious as we can be about this."

"We've written to all seven tribal colleges and asked to participate in their career fairs. We want build the confidence and trust that we'll give them a chance. Recruitment will come naturally as we build the confidence level."

Lawrenson is also organizing diversity training courses with IPA for police supervisors and officers, to begin possibly as soon as September.



Beaded jewelry is a part of the traditional powwow dance costume, Kylee Smoker, 14, shows her more modern approach to the ceremonial garb with a Nike swoosh and Chicago Bulls mascot.

After problems with her school and the incident with the police, Kylee packed up and returned to California to live with her father.

"That was probably the hardest time for me because we'd never been apart," Smoker says. "It made me mad. I felt like the city was not kind. Missoula took her away from me."

Kylee came back to Missoula to live with her mother, but she now commutes daily 100 miles round-trip by bus to Two River Eagle School in Pablo, a tribal-operated school comprised entirely of Indian students.

Unlike many Native Americans who return to reservations after facing discrimination in cities, Smoker and Gilham have stuck around.

"We have a right to be here," Smoker says. Racism that goes beyond name-calling and stereotypes can be harder to shrug off. In a test for discrimination in Great Falls

housing in the late 1980s, more than 50 percent of the Indians who participated were treated differently by landlords than were whites. They were asked to pay higher rents and deposits, and given limitations not placed on other tenants, such as being allowed to have only one car, and being warned not to crowd the house by letting extended families move in.

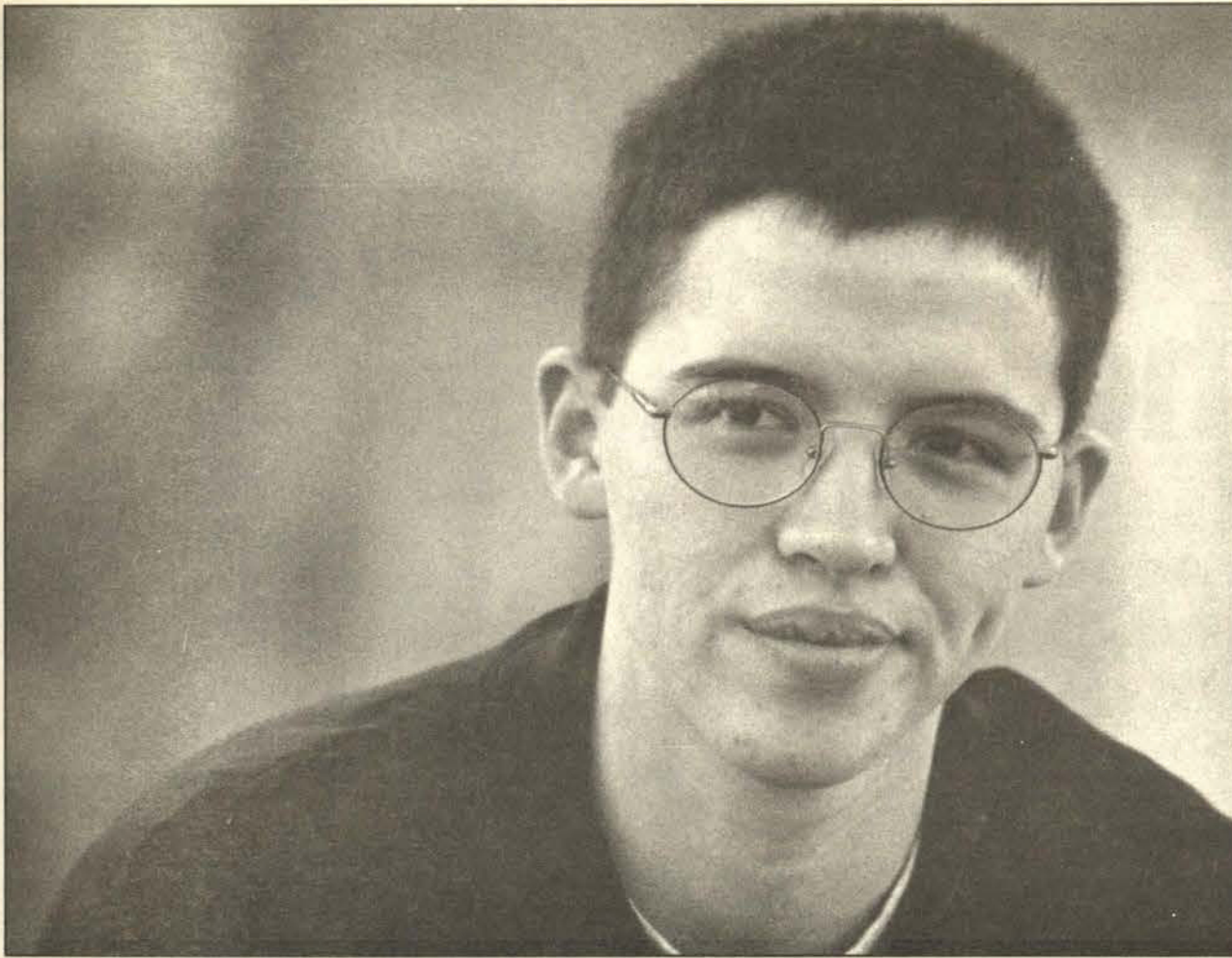
Les Stevenson, executive director of Opportunities Inc. in Great Falls has seen positive changes in his community since that study. He feels that some forms of discrimination, like in housing, have decreased due to a citizens' committee, the Indian Action Council. Comprised of city officials and Native American community leaders, the committee opened communication and addressed sensitivity issues that had been ignored during the 1960s through the 1980s. Although it didn't completely eliminate the problem, an effort was made to educate the business community that "just because they're Native American doesn't mean they're a thief," he says.

Great Falls now has a fair housing officer and a landlord association striving to maintain consistent deposits and applications. A Realtors association is helping Indians in Great Falls become homeowners.

However, critics say they fear housing discrimination in getting worse statewide.

The number of complaints filed by Native Americans with Montana Fair Housing almost doubled (from 37 in 1996 to 69 in 1997) in the last year, according to Executive Director Sue Fifield. She says a majority of these complaints came from urban areas near reservations, such as Missoula, Great Falls and Billings. Fifield expects these numbers to continue to increase.

Toole believes the numbers are higher



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We should be learning about how we lost our land, instead of how the other people got it.

Jeremy MacDonald

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than reported.

“You have to be careful when you look at statistical analysis of complaints,” Toole says. “A lot doesn’t get reported, because many times the victim doesn’t know they’ve been discriminated against.”

This occurs when an Indian wants to rent a home, and the landlord claims it has already been taken, or when the application process or deposit is different, and the Indian applicant has no way of knowing.

Assuming the victim is aware of discrimination, Toole says that because the process of filing a complaint is intimidating and time-consuming, many victims are not willing to take their complaints to a formal level.

A contributing factor to the problem lies in Native American upbringing.

“They’re not from a cultural background that encourages them to get involved with the legal process,” Toole says. “It can be confrontational and accusatory, and that’s not the Indian way of doing things.”

Robideaux says that like many Native Americans, she was raised traditionally to be soft-spoken. As a youth, her grandfather taught her to take pity on racists.

“But I’m tired of setting the example; I want people to get this,” she says.

An example of the type of complaints that comprise the Montana Fair Housing statistics is a 1994 case in which Richard and Donald Lee, owners of Lee Apartments in Billings, were accused of discriminating against Native Americans by denying them apartments based on their race and national origin.

The case ended with the Lees paying a total settlement of \$65,000, which was divided among the 12 individuals who filed complaints, a now-defunct group called the

Concerned Citizens Coalition and the United States government.

“You can’t defend yourself against someone when they do that to you,” says Donald Lee, who was born and raised on a reservation and says he had many Indian friends and never discriminated against them.

“There were 36 government people working on the case,” he says. “And they coached the testers on what to say.”

Lee says his attorney told him he could prove Lee didn’t discriminate, but taking the case to court would cost around \$100,000.

“We settled out of court because the debt was so high we couldn’t afford to defend ourselves,” he says.

Lee says, however, that he was constantly filing complaints with the police because of the unruly behavior of Native Americans who lived in his apartments.

“My brother told one of the Indians, ‘You fellows get your money from the government and you go to the Lobby Lounge and get drunk and come over and pee in the halls and poop in the halls.’”

“But we rent to anybody now,” he says. “We’re afraid not to.”

Robideaux thinks that one of the causes of discrimination is a lack of education about Indian people.

“We’re almost to the new millennium and we still have people who believe we get that government check every month,” Robideaux says. “Unless people stop believing that, discrimination will continue.”

Wyman McDonald, Montana’s coordinator for Indian Affairs, believes this problem begins in the state’s public education system. He says children should be taught Native American history, so that both Indians and non-Indians can develop an understanding

and appreciation of Indian culture. Indian children should not be left on their own to find out about it, he says.

“Government classes start in about fifth grade or so, and they express negatively what tribal governments are doing,” he says. According to MacDonald, the negative impression and criticism Indian children get from school extends into their lives, causing them to develop self-esteem problems.

Nineteen-year-old Jeremy MacDonald, an enrolled Chippewa Cree from Rocky Boy, says he learned American history in high school, but didn’t have an opportunity to take a Native American history class until he became a student at the University of Montana.

“We should be learning about how we lost our land, instead of how the other people got it,” MacDonald says. “If mainstream society were more educated (about Indian history), they would understand us more.”

Now that he’s in college, MacDonald is learning as much about Native American history and politics as he can, so that through education he can help preserve “the old ways” as a teacher, a coach and a role model to Native American children.

“Indians are fighting to hold on,” he says. “We’re trying to get back our pride.”

Gilham and her daughters continue struggling to maintain their pride in the face of racism on a daily basis. They avoid certain stores and restaurants where they know they’ll be mistreated, and they know by word-of-mouth the places where they will be welcome, or will at least be allowed to cash a check.

Gilham says they’re “getting used to it.”

“We just want to walk through life like everybody else,” she says. “You have to try not to wear (discrimination) like a cloak.”

Choosing Who Belongs

In some families one child is enrolled while siblings are not eligible to be members of the tribe. And on the Fort Belknap Reservation, enrollment really matters.

Story by
**Kim
Skornogoski**

Photos by
**Kim
Eiselein**

Running Fish was the last of the great Gros Ventre chiefs. He died in 1906 with five rusting bullets in his body from his years as a warrior fighting whites and warring tribes. After an epidemic ravaged the tribe, Chief Running Fish adopted 100 Assiniboine women into the band, marrying one, to strengthen the bloodlines and to ensure their survival.

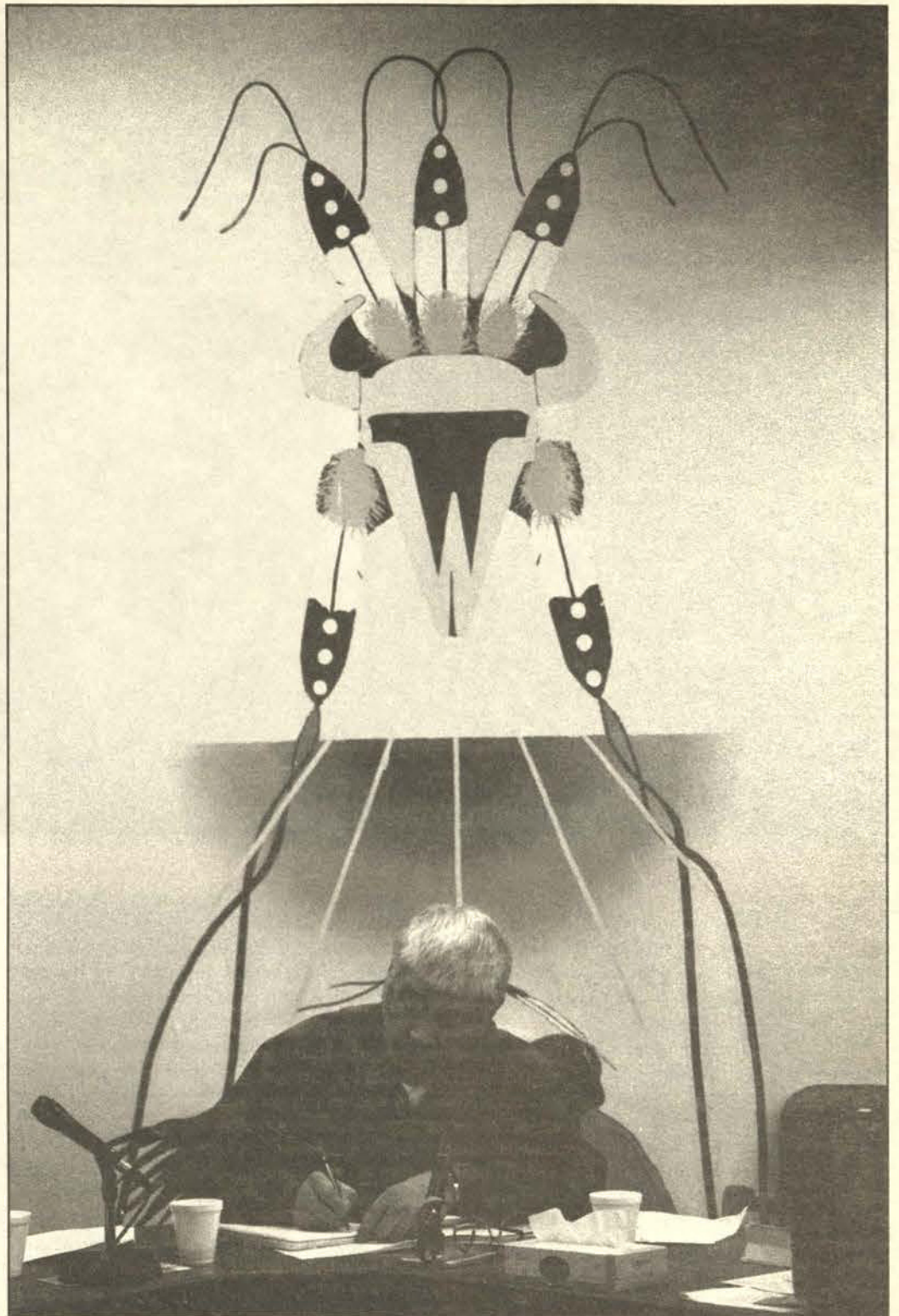
Almost 90 years later, Running Fish's descendants would regret his decision.

Willy Hughes has blue eyes. The navy blue baseball cap he wears low on his forehead covers caramel-colored hair. He is a fifth-generation descendent of Chief Running Fish and the son of a Scot. When he was 2 years old his father left him and his brother to be raised by his Gros Ventre mother on the Fort Belknap Reservation in northcentral Montana.

Since then he's spent 20 years listening to his grandfather's stories of Chief Running Fish and riding horses on his grandfather's land. But despite his lineage and how he was raised, the people of the Gros Ventre tribe don't consider him an Indian. Nor does the federal government.

Neither does he.

"I'm a white man," he says, but the words come bitterly because he's too white to be Indian and too Indian to be white, and on the reservation it makes a difference.



Joe Fox, a tribal councilman and chairman of the Fort Belknap enrollment committee, awaits the beginning of a council meeting. Fox has grandchildren who don't qualify to be enrolled and does not foresee any changes in enrollment regulations.

It takes one-quarter Assiniboine or Gros Ventre or a combination of the two bloodlines to be enrolled on the Fort Belknap Reservation, which was established in 1888. With that blood quantum comes the right to government money for health care and an annual "Christmas cash" allotment of about \$40. Enrollment also allows tribal members to apply for federal college grants and gives them preference when applying for jobs on the reservation and eligibility for one of the homes built on the reservation by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

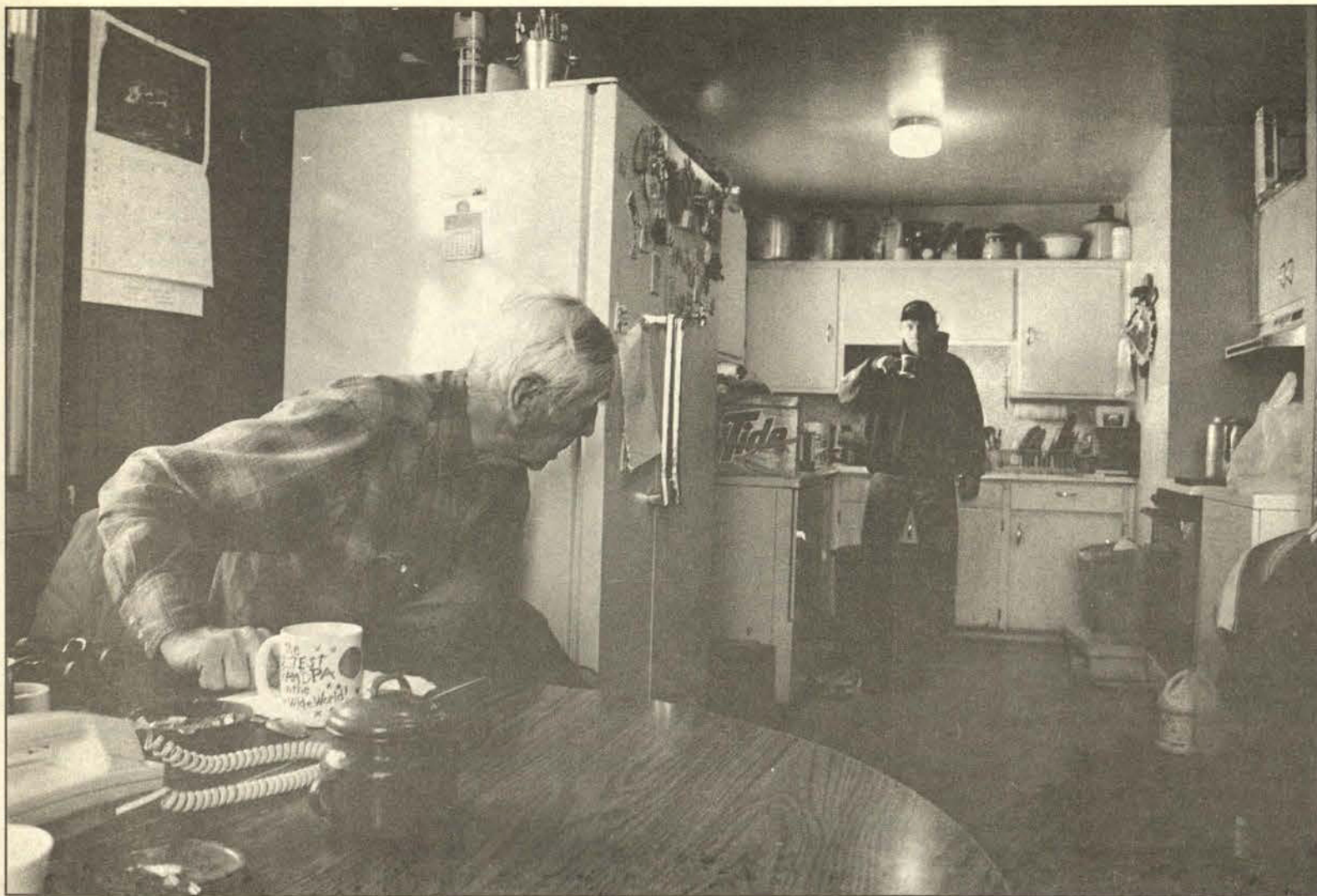
Hughes is 1/64 blood degree away from membership in the Gros Ventre tribe. Because of that fraction, he can't work at the reservation's volunteer fire department.

His Gros Ventre blood quantum began to wane when Chief Running Fish married an Assiniboine woman and hasn't stopped

diminishing since. Hughes' ancestor's attempt to make the tribe strong is now a factor in what is weakening tribal bloodlines, reducing the numbers of people who are considered Indian. Now the tribes permit a combination of the two tribal bloodlines for enrollment eligibility, but for 25 years the bloodlines were separated. Since 1921, the tribes have altered the enrollment requirements four times, each change allowing more and more people to be enrolled.

Hughes works on his grandfather's ranch and lives in his mother's home on the ranch. Through his mother, he can get health care coverage at the hospital. But his grandfather Jay Mount, 80, says Hughes doesn't get the same quality of care because he's not eligible for the comprehensive coverage negotiated by the tribe.

When Mount was 3, white men wearing crisp navy suits and suede hats came to the



Jay Mount asks his grandson Willie Hughes some questions before Hughes leaves to move cattle for the day. Hughes is 1/64 blood degree away from eligibility for enrollment in the Gros Ventre Tribe. His mother is Gros Ventre and his father is a white man.

reservation. Tribal members lined up side by side so that the government could determine who should be enrolled, entitling them to land and money. He remembers the men used an interpreter to ask questions in Gros Ventre; his answers were in English.

"State your name."

"Where were you born?"

"What is your father's name?"

"Where is your mother?"

Documents still at the reservation enumerate other queries.

"Did you ever leave the reservation to live?"

"Did you ever try to get enrolled in another reservation?"

"Did you ever receive land outside the reservation?"

"How many times have you been married?"

"What are the names of your children?"

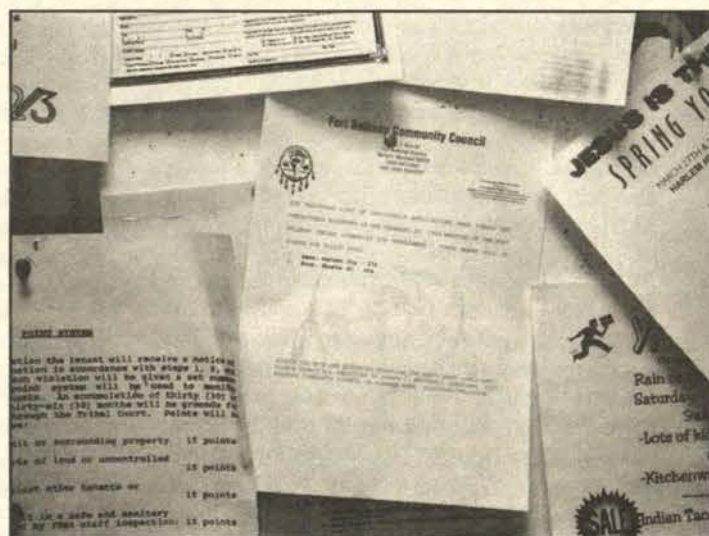
"Where did you attend school?"

Two witnesses signed their names at the bottom of the paper filled with his answers, attesting that Mount was telling the truth. He, his parents and brother, were among the first Gros Ventres to be enrolled at the reservation in 1921 — the year the tribes finally agreed to a land allotment. Mount's allotment number is 133.

The original allotment list has 1,189 names, and the questions and answers of those Assiniboine and Gros Ventre people. Marlis Lone Bear, an enrollment clerk for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, uses that list to verify new people who are trying to enroll.

Today 5,266 are enrolled but approximately half of them live off the reservation.

To enroll, an applicant fills out two pages of paperwork answering questions similar to those asked in 1921.



Every month a list of people approved for membership in the tribes is posted at places across the reservation. Tribal members have 30 days to object to the enrollment of a potential member.

"Where born?"

"What is your degree of Assiniboine/Gros Ventre Indian blood of Fort Belknap?"

"What is your degree of other Indian blood and Tribes?"

"Is your mother enrolled at Fort Belknap?"

"What is her blood degree?"

"Is your father enrolled in another tribe?"

A certified copy of the applicant's birth certificate must be submitted showing the parents' names. If the father's name isn't on

the birth certificate, the applicant must count only the mother's blood degree. A man who later claims paternity must prove it through a DNA test. If either parent is enrolled in another tribe, the child must submit proof that he isn't enrolled in that other Indian tribe.

Lone Bear then determines the applicant's blood degree, looking through pages filled line after line with 701 possible fractions of Assiniboine and Gros Ventre blood. If the applicant has enough Indian blood to be enrolled, Lone Bear submits the name to the Tribal Council. Once a month the council approves or rejects the names, and a list is then distributed to grocery stores, gas stations and the hospital, allowing enrolled members 30 days to object to the potential tribal member.

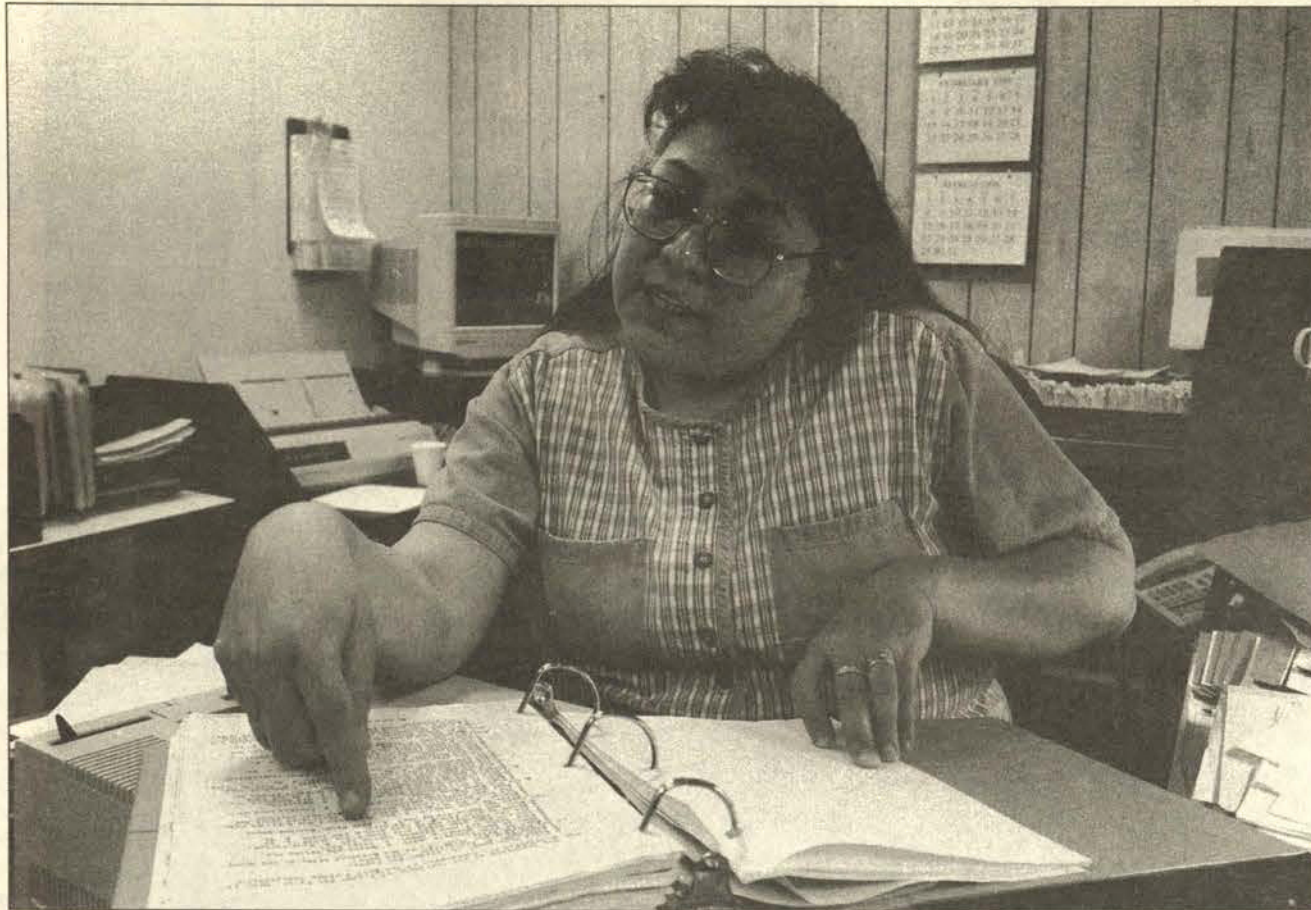
Bertha Snow, 79, knows why it's so difficult to enroll.

She recalls what she says was the jealousy and greed that came with a \$211.19 government check in 1936.

"Before the treaty payment came up, any kind of Indian blood meant you were Indian," she says. "That was before people got greedy and you had to enroll under one tribe."

The Gros Ventre tribe received its first large treaty payment in 1936 after it negotiated land rights with the federal government. The Assiniboine tribe got no payment. But because the bloodlines were by then so intertwined, Indians could choose at that point to be enrolled in either tribe.

Marlis Lone Bear, enrollment clerk for the BIA, looks at a list of the questions asked when the first allotment rolls were made. Several other books have family trees drawn out and all tribal members' blood quantum recorded in them.



Lewis looks down at the papers on her desk. Her long black hair cascades down her back, trickling over her slumped shoulders.

"You get used to it," she says with resignation.

But still, it makes her weary.

"It's just like not being an Indian even though you really are," she says.

Nedra Horn's house isn't much.

It also isn't hers.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development gave Fort Belknap money to build houses on the reservation and the authority to choose who gets those homes.

Horn is a Little Shell, a band that doesn't have a reservation. And that means she has nowhere to enroll.

Because she married an Assiniboine, the Fort Belknap tribal government gave the couple a home in Hays. But when they divorced recently, the home went to her husband even though Horn was living there with her three children and paying for the home. Her ex-husband wanted to give Horn the house but couldn't because she was not enrolled. Instead, he gave it to her oldest daughter, Brandy, who is 20.

Brandy is an enrolled Assiniboine, using her father's bloodline. She is half Assiniboine, but because the Assiniboine tribe divided into two reservations — Fort Belknap and Fort Peck bands — her blood degree is also split. She has slightly more than a quarter Fort Peck Assiniboine, and slightly less than a quarter Fort Belknap Assiniboine. But while the Fort Peck Reservation combines the two bloodlines to come up with an individual's blood quantum, Fort Belknap does not.

In 1972, a settlement payment was made to anyone who was one-eighth Gros Ventre or Assiniboine, a definition that would continue for the next 11 years to determine who could be enrolled.

Brandy was lucky; she was born before 1983 when the Distribution Act was passed, giving another treaty payment to the tribes and changing the definition of an enrolled member to a quarter tribal blood. Her younger sister, Lacy, and brother, Scotty, were born after the change, which means they are a fraction away from enrollment at Fort Belknap, despite their half Assiniboine blood.

To enroll instead at Fort Peck, Lacy, 14, and Scotty, 5, would need to have their father also enroll there and relinquish his tribal membership at Fort Belknap. That would mean he couldn't get a job where he lives.

"A lot of people don't know that my

"The Assiniboine are the ones that labeled us \$200 Gros Ventres," Snow says. "It was derogatory. But money was scarce at the time; Gros Ventres were going to get some money, so they said, 'I'll be a Gros Ventre.'"

Snow's father signed her check over to the nuns to pay for her schooling in Hays.

Even among families, Snow says, blood quantum was an issue. Fred Gone, Snow's father, was a full-blood. Her mother was seven-eighths Gros Ventre, a fact that Snow

says he refused to let her mother forget. Her mother's name was Mary John, a shortened version of Snow's grandfather's name, Gros Ventre Johnny. It was a name given to him by white men and Gone ridiculed his wife for it.

"It was a pride thing," she says.

"He had to prove

to my mother that he was a full-blood and she wasn't."

Years later Snow's family would again be taunted for a fractioned blood degree; this time the target was her granddaughter Michele.

Michele Lewis has lived on the Fort Belknap Reservation all but five of her 37 years. She was raised by her grandmother in a house where family photographs hang on pale blue walls next to paintings of Jesus.

Lewis considers herself Gros Ventre in every way.

Every way, that is, except on paper. But somehow that fact always manages to creep back into her life.

As a young girl, Lewis remembers what happened after she first moved to the reservation from California. She was playing with

friends when a few old women came up to her and asked her who she was. She told them. And she remembers vividly what they said:

"Oh, you're that little half-breed; you came from down south."

"At the time it didn't mean much," Lewis says. "I never really paid attention. But later on when I was in my early teens I knew what they were talking about. I realized there are distinct classes of people here and they all keep track of what family you come from and how Indian you are."

In 1978, Bertha Snow was thinking ahead and enrolled her granddaughter in the Navajo tribe in New Mexico, enabling Lewis to apply for money for higher education. Lewis is half Navajo and 1/164 away from qualifying for Gros Ventre enrollment.

Unfortunately, in 1980, when it came time for college, the Navajo told Lewis they didn't have enough school grants for tribal members who lived on the reservation, let alone for her. She also didn't qualify for money from the Fort Belknap Reservation because enrollment is required to qualify for the college grants.

Lewis worked her way through school for three years, winning a few college scholarships, but had to drop out when college costs grew too high.

She went to work in the Fort Belknap Community College registrar's office, where she filled in for her boss while the college looked for his replacement. Lewis applied for, but didn't get, the permanent position, she says, because she was not enrolled, even though the job was one of few on the reservation that didn't give hiring priority to tribal members. Fortunately, she says, the enrolled candidate declined the job and she was second on their list.

"Whenever I apply for something I'm very careful to do a good job and I check to make sure I can qualify," she says. "It gets frustrating to try to do something and keep hearing no. The disappointment is the worst."

Serving more than 25 years on a treaty committee, Gilbert Horn, an Assiniboine, uses his knowledge on Fort Belknap issues to lobby not only for his tribe, but for his own family.



youngest children aren't enrolled," Nedra Horn says. "People see my young dark Indian daughter and think she's enrolled."

But Horn is hopeful things will change.

"The blood quantum is thinning out," she says. "Pretty soon my kids' blood quantum may be acceptable."

Lacy's cheekbones boldly mark her ancestry. She looks like her father and she's proud of it. Her skin is dark, her eyes exotic, her hair flows black.

Scotty seems attached to his mother's hip. A constant smile fills his round face. When his mother carries him, his pale brown cheek melds with hers.

This year, the school had money from the government to buy shoes for the enrolled children at Hays/Lodgepole School. Horn, who teaches second and third graders there, saw the forms and whispered to a teacher "but they're not enrolled." The teacher told her to fill them out anyway and see what happened.

Her Assiniboine-looking daughter was given the \$30 for shoes, while her "half-breed" son was not.

"I'm a half-breed," Horn says. "This community is so small that everyone knows that. It's hard. We're really, really looked down on. But as long as you don't get too involved in things people respect you."

Brandy may be enrolled, but because of her light skin and the "half-breed" stigma of some family members, she says she is often hit with the prejudice that comes from not being enrolled. Horn says Brandy has applied for temporary secretarial jobs and was fired within hours because people have asked why she got the job when another enrolled member needed one. Brandy's grandfather, Gilbert Horn, is a longtime Assiniboine leader who has tried to open doors for his grandchildren. He has also fought battles for his tribe.

Horn, 85, has been on the Assiniboine treaty committee for the past 28 years, taking over a role his father had. The treaty committee negotiates with the federal government, representing Fort Belknap tribal members' interests in reservation lands.

In the 1950s, Horn was the voice of the Assiniboine tribe. Most of the elders couldn't speak English and Horn was there to represent them in the white man's world using the white man's ways.

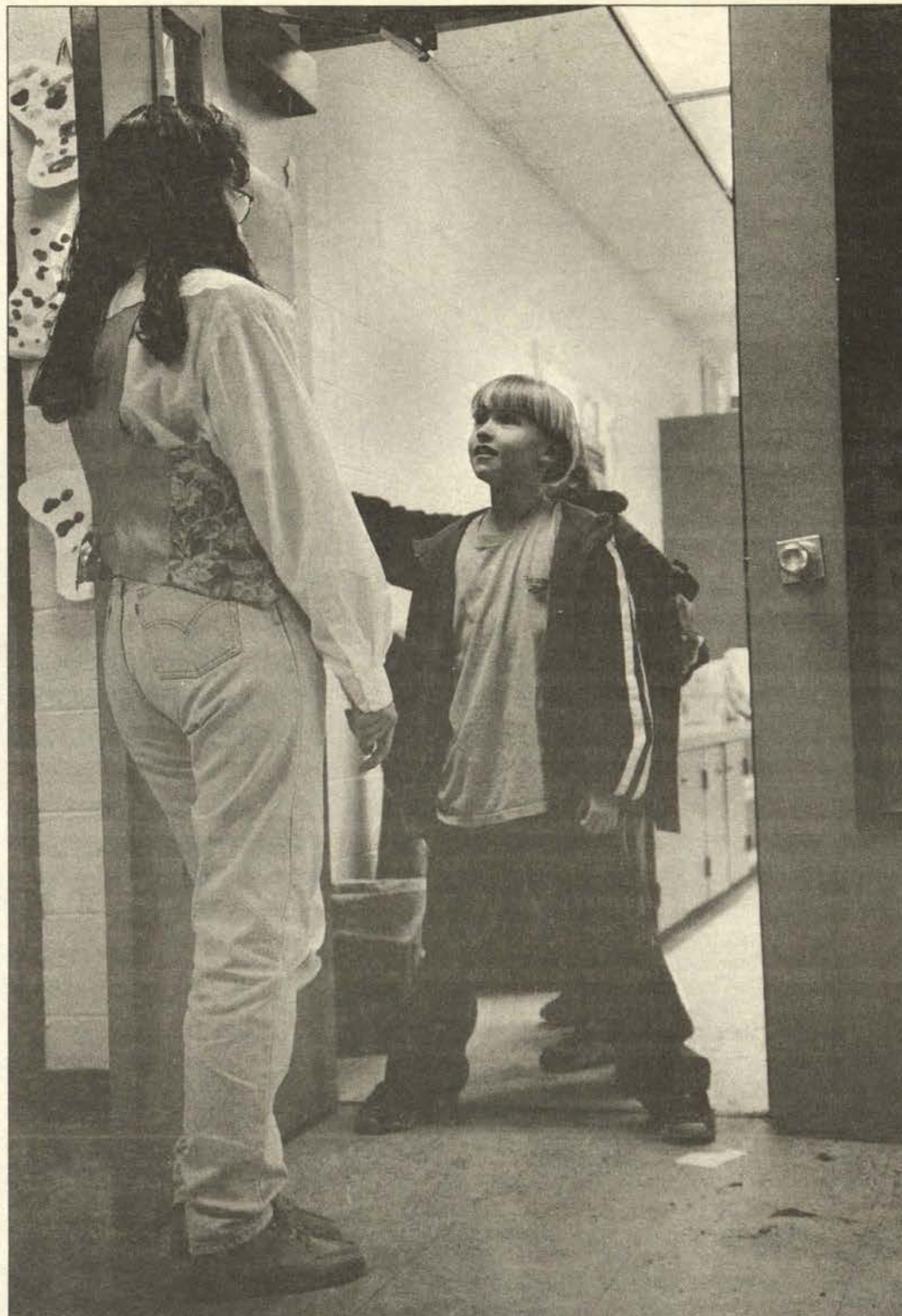
"I was younger then," he says. "It didn't bother me to cut my braids and talk English."

Horn traveled to Washington, D.C., several times a month representing the tribe on different committees, lobbying Congress on Indian issues.

He remembers one trip in particular. He walked into a room at the Watergate Hotel and was greeted by 17 white lawyers. He sat at the end of a long, gleaming oak table and the lawyers in their suits sat along the sides. It was there before all those white men, that Horn decided new enrollment guidelines for the Fort Belknap tribe.

Jay Mount and Bertha Snow also sat on a treaty committee, both for the Gros Ventre tribe. They remember the discussions about who could get treaty payments and who would be in the tribe. Now they express regret at how things turned out.

"I think it's wrong," Snow says. "It's wrong for the younger generation to scratch and scrape for information to prove who they are to the white man when they look like Chief Joseph."



Nedra Horn supervises her second- and third-graders as they await the last bell at Hays/Lodgepole School. Enrollment changes mean one of Horn's children is a tribal member and the other two are not.

But any change must start with the tribal council, elected by people who already are enrolled.

William "Snuffy" Main has been on the tribal council 11 of the past 15 years and the other four years he spent working for the BIA in Washington. He says a change isn't likely.

"There's been a lot of discussion about it," he says. "My position on it is blood degree may not be the ideal way to go about it, but show me another way. How do you look in somebody's heart and determine whether they are Indian or not?"

Expanding enrollment would mean that money, land and other benefits would be further divided. And that, says Main, is not something the people who now get the benefits would favor.

Joe Fox, who is a tribal councilman and chairman of the enrollment committee, has grandchildren who don't qualify for enrollment. He knows that they probably never will.

"You can't change things now; there's just too many factors that get tangled up in it,"

he says. "There's been talk about it, but I don't see anything happening."

The tribal council has taken steps to incorporate the people who live on the reservation and can't be enrolled. They've created "community members," unenrolled people who have a parent who is enrolled. But community members don't get any of the benefits that come with being a member of the tribe, including the honor.

"It's just a title," Michele Lewis says. "It doesn't mean anything when you look for a job or when people see you on the street."

The community member title may be the best Lewis will ever get.

Non-Indians see her as Indian and judge her because of it. Members of her tribe see her as a half-breed and some show her contempt. Luckily, she says, there are others who don't see it that way and will fight for her and others like her. Jay Mount is one of them.

"As long as you have one drop of Indian blood in you," Mount says, "you're still a damn Indian."



Kim Eiselein photo

“

We have to pay attention to what our ancestors told us about the buffalo. The buffalo never run away from a blizzard because they know if they did it would follow them and chances are they wouldn't make it. We have to put our head down and go right for that blizzard.

Iris Heavy Runner

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