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A SPECIAL REPORT
BY THE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

**MONTANA'S
INDIANS**



Almost one in every three houses on Montana's Indian reservations is tagged substandard by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The federal government has invested millions of dollars in attempts to upgrade housing on the reservations but still thousands of the state's American Indians live in desperate and desolate circumstances.

This report by honors students at the University of Montana School of Journalism looks at the state of housing for Montana's Indians living on reservations and in urban areas. On some reservations, like the Crow, conditions are especially bleak. On others, like the Flathead, model housing programs have won national acclaim.

The picture detailed in this report is frequently unsettling. It is one of poverty, neglect and finger-pointing. But it is also one of hope, of innovation, and of vision.

*Someplace
to call* **Home**

Alexis Rose Wounded Face, 2, peers from the front door of her home in Poplar, Mont. The house is part of a Fort Peck Reservation project recommended for demolition because of poor water and sewer systems.

**Photograph by
Steve Adams**

MONTANA'S INDIANS

The School of Journalism at the University of Montana has in recent years been trying to integrate into its curriculum courses that include information on Montana's Indians. For the past four years the School of Journalism has offered an honors course that examines issues that are critical to Indian tribes who reside within Montana's borders. Three years ago reporters and photographers, Native American and whites, combined forces to explore education issues. Two years ago students covered Native American health issues. Last year students did a report on gaming and how the tribes in Montana were attempting to cash in on the economic benefits of gambling. This year's topic is housing. Those who have toured Indian reservations often comment on the poor living conditions and the run-down houses. Our honors students tried to present the major housing issues that affect Indians both on and off the reservations.

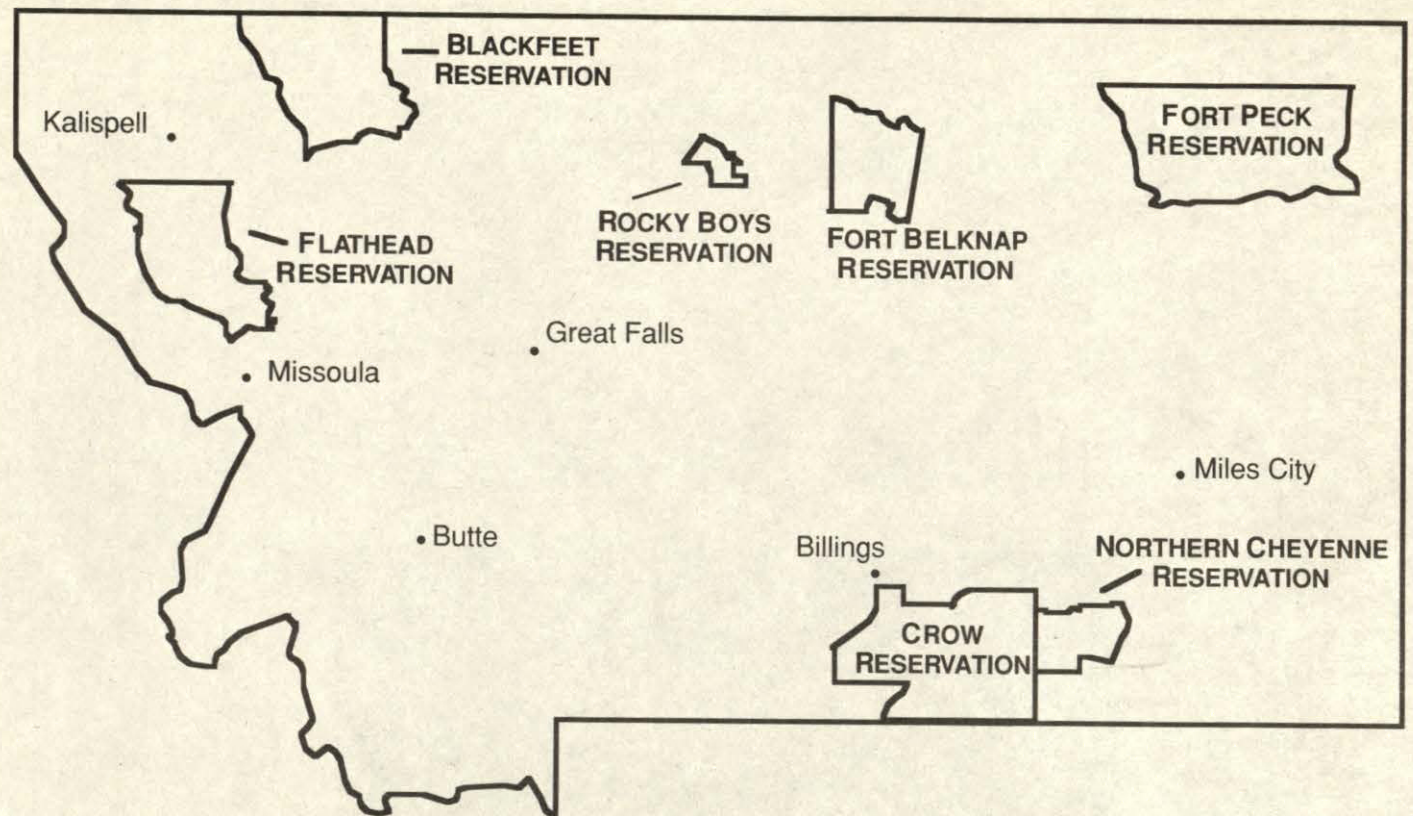
This class was taught by Patty Reksten and Carol Van Valkenburg, both associate professors at the School of Journalism. Woody Kipp, the School of Journalism's American Indian affairs specialist, assisted in teaching the class.

We owe our thanks to many for their financial assistance with this report. For two years in a row, *The Missoulian* has printed the special report. Jim Bell, new publisher of the daily newspaper, has generously offered to print this year's tab and to include it as a supplement to *The Missoulian*. A special thanks to Dean John Madden of the UM Davidson Honors College who has continually supported our efforts with encouragement and contributions.

We are grateful, too, to all who spoke, provided advice and background material. As always, we appreciate those who allowed themselves to be interviewed and photographed.

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A SPECIAL REPORT
BY THE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
MISSOULA, MT 59812
SUMMER 1995



AFTER A CENTURY, AMERICAN INDIANS STILL STRIVING FOR DECENT HOUSING

Written by Marc Denny and Michael Jamison

For centuries Montana's Indians lived in dwellings made of buffalo hide and lodgepole pine. Cool in the summer and warm in the winter, Native American tepees were always clean and easy to break down for transport to hunting grounds or winter havens.

But by the late 1800s the white men had hunted the buffalo to the brink of extinction and moved the Indians onto reservations. Indians were forced to abandon their ancient ways as whites tried to force their assimilation. Tepees were replaced by dank one-room cabins made of scrap wood and logs.

As Native American culture was changing, so was white society. The urbanization of America brought with it running water, electricity, indoor plumbing, and central heating to many homes. Yet nearly all reservation Indians were too poor to acquire these improvements. Housing, unlike health care and education, was not a treaty right, although many would say it is a trust responsibility. Well into the 1950s, housing for Indians remained dismal, with one-room cabins, tarpaper shacks and army surplus canvas tents the norm.

In 1961 the federal government began to try to improve housing on reservations, just as it was doing elsewhere in the nation. Cooperative housing efforts involved tribal governments, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Public Housing Administration. In one program families donated their land and labor as a down payment on their homes. By 1965 more than 300 new homes had been built, mostly on reservations in the West. Urban Indians also got some help through aid programs for low-income families.

Other efforts continued through the 1970s, usually under the sponsorship of the BIA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Despite these efforts, housing for the state's American Indians is still at a crisis state.

A 1994 BIA survey of homes on six of Montana's seven reservations showed that nearly one in three houses is substandard, many dilapidated beyond repair.

The conditions on some reservations are especially bleak. For example, on the Crow Reservation in southcentral Montana, more than half the homes need renovation or replacement. And on every reservation, not only are conditions grim, but overcrowding is severe because of housing shortages.

Today HUD is faced with more demand for houses than it can provide. The agency has been severely hampered by federal budget cuts and faces the possibility of extinction. Improved housing conditions in Indian Country remain a tenuous thing at best, with

many Native Americans on housing waiting lists for interminable periods, staying off homelessness by crowding into ramshackle quarters with willing relatives.

Recently Congress tried a new approach to the housing crisis: It put some of the responsibility for providing low-income housing loans on the shoulders of private banks. Banks must now show they are addressing the credit needs of their entire communities, including making loans in low-income sectors. This new law jumped what seemed to be an overwhelming obstacle to bettering conditions on the reservations.

Much tribal land is held in trust, meaning the tribe or the Indian owner holds the land jointly with the federal government. Decisions involving the land, such as sale or lease, must be made with the consent of the BIA. One result of the trust system is that the tribes or individuals cannot independently sell off or mortgage portions of their reservations, thus ensuring that the land will remain intact for future tribal members.

Though arguably sound in theory, in practice that partnership has hamstrung Indian landowners.

Had a bank agreed to lend money to someone to build a home on trust land, if the homeowner defaulted the bank would get the house, but not the land. To recover its investment, a bank would have to move the home off the land, hardly an incentive to lend money. And defaults, the banks reasoned, were inevitable in such high-risk communities. The banks, then, were caught between a mandate to service low-income borrowers and the realities of the Indian trust system.

A solution came in 1992 when Congress passed the Indian Housing Loan Guarantee Program, in which the federal government essentially agreed to back private loans on trust lands. If a homeowner defaults, the federal government will sell the foreclosed property back into the trust system, either to a tribal member, the tribe itself, or the tribal housing authority. Although a tribal member's trust land can never be sold out from under the protective umbrella of the trust system, the trust land can be sold from one tribal member to another.

With programs such as this, if private lenders can be compelled to fill the gaps that HUD cannot, far more Indian families will one day own a home. Such programs are still young, so young that success or failure is cannot yet be measured. But one thing is certain: as reservation populations swell and HUD's resources dwindle, creative partnerships will be critical if the Indian housing crisis is not to become an Indian housing disaster.

BLACKFEET RESERVATION

Someplace
to call **Home**

Contractor Bill Aubrey stands near Thelma Rides At Door's unfinished house.



BLACKFEET'S BILL AUBREY IS BOTH DEMONIZED AND DEIFIED

His construction company has won more than \$450 million in federal housing contracts and built about 325 homes on the Blackfeet Reservation. But a dispute with the Tribal Council has left dozens of reservation residents without their promised new homes.

Montana's youngest ghost town sits just east of Browning on the Blackfeet Reservation.

The 27 homes that comprise the College Place project sit empty, their would-be-residents caught in the crossfire of a legal battle between tribal housing officials and the largest Indian contractor in the nation — a battle replete with threats and accusations of underhanded dealings — and with millions of dollars hanging in the balance.

Thelma Rides At Door should have been snug in her new home in this development last fall, before the wicked winds off the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains brought winter from the west side of the continent. She should have been well on her way to home owner-



Thelma Rides At Door

ship through the Blackfeet Nation's HOME Program.

Instead, she spends her days in a tired old house behind Teeple's IGA in Browning. She talks wistfully about her promised home, with its extra bedroom and garage and room enough to display her fancy crafts.

At the very least, she says, her new home's windows won't give way to the town's burglars like the rotten old window frames in her present home.

"People are always coming in here, stealing something," says Rides At Door, sharing an easy chair with one of her three grandchildren who also live in the house. "There were a lot of rings, and some bracelets." Now they are gone, just as she fears her hopes for a new home will be.

In his latest skirmish with the Blackfeet Tribal Council, contractor Bill Aubrey stopped working on Rides At Door's house and 26 like it on March 20 after the tribe yanked his company's right to manage other tribally owned houses.

Aubrey moved to the reservation in 1992 and quickly landed the tribe millions from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under an innovative new program that, had it worked correctly, would have forever freed the tribe from needing federal housing money.

He brought the HOME program to the Blackfeet Nation.

Conceived in 1988, the HOME program encourages cities, towns and tribes to look to private enterprise to free them from federal housing dependency by providing seed money.

In the case of the Blackfeet Tribe, for instance, HUD awarded \$5.5 million to the tribe to build 72 homes. Those were to be mortgaged, with a portion of the payments going into a fund that the tribe would use to build more houses. These new houses then would be mortgaged, contributing more to the fund to build more houses, and so on.

Aubrey wrote the proposals and was awarded the construction contracts for HOME grants in 1992, 1993 and 1994. Another Aubrey company, Lodgebuilder Management, was also awarded the management contract for those homes and 50 others in Browning's older Last Star project.

In theory, everybody

Written by Kyle Wood
Photographed by Jay Schweitzer

wins: tribal members get much-needed housing and construction jobs and the tribe is on the road to financial emancipation from the government. At \$5.5 million, the 1992 grant represented about 40 percent of all the money the federal government set aside for Indian tribes that year.

But somewhere along the way, things went horribly wrong with the Blackfeet HOME program.

After spending all but \$15,000 of the \$5.5 million to build 51 homes in the first contract, Aubrey proposed mortgaging them and the Last Star project homes to finish the remaining 21. That drew a stern letter of concern from HUD's director of Native American Programs in Denver and raised the eyebrows of some newly elected tribal council members and housing officials.

Aubrey maintains that was the arrangement all along. He even had the financing secured, he says. All the tribe had to do was approve the deal at no risk to itself. The tribe didn't do itself any favors by stopping him from securing the financing, he says.

"They want to run everything," Aubrey says. "They don't want to see people in homes."

The tribe says he was supposed to build 68 of the houses, not just 51, then mortgage them to build the rest. The tribe would have had to pay if anybody defaulted on mortgage payments, council members say.

"They (Aubrey and his company) seem to have plausible explanations for almost anything," says Joe Gervais, the interim director of the HOME program.

From his second-story office in downtown Browning, Bill Aubrey can glance up from his desk at the national headquarters of Blaze Construction Inc. and see Thelma Rides At Door's house in the unfinished College Place project. The flamboyant president of Blaze, which did about \$44 million in mostly government contracts last year, has plenty to say about most things. On this day, he is talking about the Blackfeet Tribe and his adopted home.

"The tribe has the worst credit, the worst track record of any business I've ever seen," Aubrey says in a booming voice frequently punctuated by a string of profanities.

"Look at the community. It's the biggest dump in the state, aside from our projects," he adds, motioning out the window to trash-filled gutters in front of his building.

He speaks quickly as his company lieutenants hover around him and a steady stream of callers and visitors make their way to his corner office.

Small, triumphant glimpses of Bill Aubrey's life grace the walls of the room. On one wall hang the autographed photographs of the contractor with professional golfers Chip Beck and Bob Gilbert. Another is adorned with a glass case filled with dozens of photographs of Aubrey's prize racehorses.

Aubrey, an enrolled tribal member who is one-eighth Blackfeet, grew up in the off-reservation towns of Shelby and Cut Bank where he worked for his father's construction company. He moved to Seattle after he graduated, he says, because that's where the jobs were. He moved to Yakima, Wash., in



“Look at the community. It's the biggest dump in the state, aside from our projects.”

— Contractor Bill Aubrey, referring to Browning



“Bill Aubrey is not a legitimate member of this tribe or of this community.”

— Joe McKay, attorney and former tribal councilman

1978, and formed Blaze Construction five years later.

Since then, the company has done more than \$450 million in mostly federal contracts on reservations across the West. It has branch offices in Yakima and in Albuquerque, N.M. Its national headquarters moved to Browning in 1992.

Aubrey's local impact on Browning is clear. Gervais, who also serves as the tribe's economist, says the 100 or so people Aubrey employs during the construction season make him the fourth-largest employer in town and the largest private employer. Browning's unemployment rate, Gervais says, hovers around 60 percent.

Aubrey also owns a share in three other Browning businesses (the Glacier Motel, the EJK Inc. gas station and Lil's Place, a bar) and has built about 325 homes on the reservation with a waiting list 1,740 names long. He began an undisputed 80-unit project for the Tribal Housing Authority in mid-April.

Aubrey temporarily laid off 40 workers from both Blaze and Lodgebuilder when he stopped building the HOME houses in March. Among those out of work was Herb Gilham. In town where tribal and federal government and the school are the largest employers, there are not many opportunities in the private sector. Aubrey had offered

Gilham a second chance at employment in Browning when he gave him a job with Lodgebuilder, his management firm.

"I was pressured out of two or three tribal jobs," Gilham says, citing tribal politics as the reason. "What do you think my chances are of working for the tribe? They're going to be nil."

Aubrey's help doesn't stop at offers of employment. He buys turkeys and toys for the poor during the holidays, a point his supporters seize upon.

"What has he (Bill Aubrey) ever done to make you people constantly put him down?" supporter Calvin Clark wrote to the now-defunct weekly magazine, *Through the Eyes of an Indian*. "We are like a bucket of crabs ... when one of us gets to the top of the bucket, all the rest of us pull him down."

Aubrey says he moved his company from Yakima to the reservation two and a half years ago to help his people. He could have taken the HOME program anywhere, he says.

"I have a lot to add," he says between puffs of an ever-present Carlton 100 cigarette. "Sometimes it's fun to create something."

And why has he made so many enemies in Browning? Sheer Indian jealousy, he contends.

"There's that group," he says, referring to his detractors. "They'd rather hurt their people in an attempt to stop me."

Says Allen Todd, Blaze's in-house counsel: "If it weren't for him, there would not be these homes here. It's like biting the hand that feeds you."

"No good deed goes unpunished."

But Aubrey's enemies say he's a power-hungry outsider, hell-bent on using his status as an enrolled tribal member to reap his own rewards. He realizes the profits of Indian-preference contracts and wants to run the whole reservation, they say.

Two of his most vocal critics on the reservation are the McKay brothers, Joe and Tom.

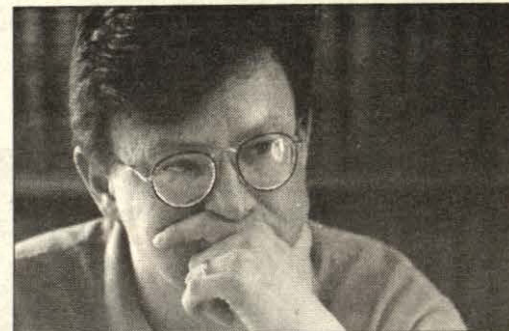
Lifetime reservation residents, both McKays are entangled with Aubrey in various lawsuits in tribal court. Tom McKay was the owner of *Through the Eyes of an Indian*, which dedicated much of its weekly news diet to Aubrey, Blaze Construction and the HOME program before it shut down in early 1994.

Joe McKay, an attorney and former tribal councilman, was the tribe's first HOME program director. It is his name that appears above Aubrey's on the disputed 1992 contract.

BLACKFEET RESERVATION

Someplace
to call **Home**

A coyote wanders the foothills of the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains on the Blackfeet Reservation. Montana's isolated reservations offer few job opportunities.



“I still haven't figured out if Bill Aubrey is the savior or the anti-Christ.”

— Joe Gervais
Blackfeet tribal councilman

In an organized, deliberate delivery that he learned from his years as an attorney, Joe McKay lays out the case against Bill Aubrey. He's collected a small library of documents he uses as evidence against the contractor.

“Bill Aubrey is not a legitimate member of this tribe or of this community,” he says from his living room in Browning's tribally owned Last Star project. His case against Aubrey is spread before him in a barrage of legal documents, copies of letters and manila folders.

McKay flashes anger when he speaks of the reservation's wealthiest member, attacking him for everything from excessive greed to not being a properly enrolled tribal member.

It all started, he says, with the HOME project.

Blaze was supposed to mortgage the houses he built, McKay says, but not until 68 were finished. Blaze spent the money that was supposed to go into the trust fund before construction even started, he says. The project was a modified “turnkey” project, which means the builder finishes construction and turns the key over to the owner in exchange for payment.

“Bill violated the contract in a number of ways,” he says.

“The minimum he had to finish was 68 homes for \$5.5 million.”

McKay says he split with Aubrey in 1993 over what he says were some underhanded dealings.

“That's when I broke with Bill Aubrey and decided that that's a person I didn't want anything to do with,” he says.

At McKay's prodding, the newly elected tribal council told Aubrey in June 1994 to hold off on his plan to mortgage the HOME houses until they could look things over. Then, they demanded Aubrey turn over all HOME program documents, which were stored at Blaze Construction. That sparked the battle that eventually led Blaze Construction to stop building *Thelma Rides At Door's* home in College Place.

Aubrey says Joe McKay is just bitter because Lodgebuilder won the management contract for Last Star, a project McKay's father started in 1970. McKay lives at 41 Last Star.

After he broke with Aubrey, McKay started looking into the builder's past, and says he unearthed a spotty personal and corporate history. Aubrey came to the reservation because he faces a 90-day jail sentence and a \$1,000 fine in Yakima County, stemming from a 1989 Driving While Intoxicated conviction, McKay alleges.

“He's here right now for two reasons,” Joe McKay says. “One, to exploit the reservation and its opportunities and two, they would put him in jail if he goes back.”

Aubrey even spent about two hours in the Bureau of Indian Affairs jail last November when Blackfeet tribal police learned of the Washington misdemeanor. A Blackfeet tribal judge subsequently issued a restraining order against the Yakima officials to prevent them from enforcing the warrant on the Blackfeet Reservation. The judge also ordered a prosecutor and judge to appear before the tribal court to tell it why the restraining order shouldn't be permanent. They didn't show and the arrest warrant in Washington state still stands.

And questions of who really owns Blaze Construction have dogged the company for years — from a Senate Committee in Washington, D.C., to a federal courtroom in Arizona — because of its ties to white Yakima contractor Albert DeAtley. Federal District Court Judge Paul Rosenblatt in 1993 called DeAtley the “alter-ego” of Blaze Construction.

Aubrey, however, told Indian Country Today that the judge's ruling was “all bullshit.”

Joe McKay says he might even try to challenge Aubrey's status as an enrolled tribal member, a move that would rob him of the Indian preference he enjoys in bid competitions. Aubrey was born off the reservation in Shelby, where his father opened a construction company. The tribal constitution says the children of tribal members born off the reservation are only members themselves if the parent was away because of military service, for health care or because of temporary employment.

“Under a technical reading of the tribal constitution, Bill Aubrey is not a member of this tribe,” he says. “Bill Aubrey is a fraud in every sense of the word.”

Everybody agrees that the houses will eventually

be built. Smoke should already be rolling out of the chimneys of contented HOME tenants, Aubrey says, but for the tribe stopping him from arranging the proper financing.

“If they'd let off me and let me build, I'd do it,” he says. “We had all kinds of money” from leveraging the remaining houses.

Joe Gervais is quick to point out that the tribe yanked only its management contracts with Aubrey. Tribal officials want him back to work building the homes in College Place, and if he doesn't finish the construction by this fall, the tribe will go after his performance bond.

“We're going to wait to see if he goes back to work,” says Gervais, who lives in a finished HOME house in East Glacier Park. “I still haven't figured out if Bill Aubrey is the savior or the anti-Christ.”

But who will pay for the houses and when? That's a question for a tribal court system both sides claim is unfair to them. Tribal judges are appointed and removed from their offices by the tribal council.

“We didn't feel confident in the tribal judges here because there's rumors both ways,” Gervais says. “There's rumors the tribal council controls the court and there's rumors that Bill Aubrey controls the court, so they agreed on an outside judge.”

A judge from the Flathead Reservation southwest of Browning has already been called in to rule on the issue of whether Aubrey can sue the tribe for terminating his management contracts. The judge said the builder can't sue the tribe.

Aubrey has appealed that ruling to the Blackfeet Court of Appeals, but it has proven difficult to find three appeals court judges who have no ties to either Blaze Construction or the tribe.

HUD won't get involved because it's a matter between the Blackfeet Tribe and Blaze Construction, according to Vernon Haragara, HUD's director of Native American Programs in Denver.

“The overall philosophy is to give most of the control over the operation of the program to the grantees,” he says. “They should be in control.”

Indian sovereignty will also keep the case out of federal court.



Rides At Door lives with two of her daughters and four grandchildren. In her livingroom is a bed where Coobee Yellow Horse lies sick. Rides At Door says she will be glad to move into a larger home.



Thelma Rides At Door says she doesn't know that much about the battle that has delayed her moving into her new house. She says the tribe should just lay off and let Aubrey finish her house. And her yard with real grass. And a garage for her car. But most of all, she wants relief from the small house behind Teeple's IGA that sometimes accommodates as many as 15 people at one time.

"If these people would quit fighting among themselves, we could really get things done, like the Hispanics and the Blacks," she says, her face pressed against a cold sliding glass door so that she can get a glimpse inside her unfinished house.

"I think that would be really good if the people would come together to do things."



Rides At Door believes the location and structure of her new home will give her the comfort and security her current home doesn't have.

Rides At Door and Jermie Begay, 4, peer into the unfinished house she was supposed to move into last fall.



CITIES NO SANCTUARY FOR URBAN INDIANS

Four generations
of Sangreys
subsist in a
Great Falls
housing project



Someplace
to call **Home**

Written by
Thomas Nybo
Photographed by
Derek Pruitt

Lucy Sangrey is content to live her last years in the subsidized Parkdale housing project. Her son, Danny, who is due to retire from the military in two years, encourages her to save money every month. "This way I can pay for my funeral," Sangrey says. "I don't want to be a burden on my family." Years of migrant farm labor took its toll. The cleaning and tidying that Sangrey did over the years for the family is now done for her by her daughters. Frustrated by the limitations imposed by arthritis, she enjoys the proximity of her family and their willingness to help.

It's been almost a lifetime since Lucy Sangrey deserted her family's northern Montana dugout for the shanties of Hill 57 on the outskirts of Great Falls.

A lifetime punctuated by nine children, three stillbirths, and a laborious journey to find decent housing.

Now 68, Sangrey sits in the living room of her rent-subsidized apartment in this Montana city of 60,000 people, and enveloped by images of her family and Christ, retraces the steps of her flight from homelessness.

It is a story not uncommon among Native Americans discouraged by the high unemployment and substandard housing conditions on or near Montana's seven Indian reservations. Just as Sangrey did nearly a half-century ago, Indians today still migrate to Montana's urban areas searching for something better. And like Sangrey, many end up in the same meager circumstances but in an urban setting.

Sangrey's journey began on the hillsides of Montana's Hi-Line, the northern area of the state that stretches 400 miles eastward from Cut Bank to the North Dakota border.

There is no Indian reservation in Sangrey's story. Her ancestors, the Little Shell of Turtle Mountain, North Dakota, lost their land in 1863 when members of their tribe, left behind while the Little Shell band



went to Montana on a hunting expedition, made a deal with the U.S. government, selling millions of acres for 10 cents an acre.

Like the more than 100 other Little Shell families, Sangrey's ancestors were left without a home. In her youth Sangrey recalls her family traveling from Havre to Harlem, hiring themselves out as migrant farmers, topping beets and harvesting grain.

Her father and brothers worked the fields six months a year, often for less than a dollar a day. At night they bent their backs again, gouging holes in the nearby hillsides big enough to house their family of 12.

"We would build what they called dugouts," she says. "Dad built the front out of little logs. It was crowded. The boys would have the open place to sleep and Mom and Dad kept us girls all together. There were four of us girls."

A blanket or scrap wood partition would separate Sangrey's sisters and brothers. There was a window and a doorway in the front wall. No one knew who owned the land, Sangrey says. It was just there for the digging.

Sangrey's mother died when Sangrey was 13. By the time she was 17 and met Irvin Sangrey, she had already raised her three younger brothers.

Irvin and Lucy married when she turned 18 and it wasn't long before their family numbered four. By 1947 Irvin Sangrey couldn't find enough work to feed four mouths. Though he was enrolled at the nearby Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation, his tribal allotment was useless if it was only another place to starve. The family decided to take the path of Lucy Sangrey's brothers, who had hired on at the Anaconda Co. smelter in Black Eagle, across the Missouri River from Great Falls.

Home became a rundown shack on Hill 57.

Hill 57 is a treeless, wind-stricken hump that bulges like a cyst from the otherwise flat landscape of the city's west side. Great Falls' homeless Indians took to the hill's south flank in the late 1920s after the city council ordered that the Indian tent camps along the Missouri

River be burned. The city reasoned that the camps were too close to a sewer drainage feeding into the river.

In the 1930s, a pickle salesman took advantage of

the hill's large boulders, whitewashing them with the name of his Heinz 57 product line. The 57 came to represent not only Heinz' 57 varieties of merchandise, but also the various tribes of Indians on the hill.

"That's where all the people we knew lived," Lucy Sangrey says. "All the families that lived there didn't have to pay rent. They built their places out of lumber and cardboard boxes."

Neighbors shared outhouses and walked miles to scout for firewood. Sangrey says her strongest memory of their two-room shack was the chill their barrel stove could never chase away.

Finding no permanent work at the smelter, the Sangreys turned to seasonal jobs to try to scrape up enough money to move off the hill.

As she tells her story, Lucy Sangrey's arthritic fingers constantly clasp the neck of the cane she uses to alleviate the pain caused by an ailing hip socket, worn by endless summers bucking hay bails in Townsend and picking potatoes in Fairfield for \$50 a week.

After six years and five more children, the Sangreys moved from the base of Hill 57 to the barn red tenements on its crest, known as Mount Royal. The buildings on Mount Royal were constructed from boxcar wood scavenged by a retired railroad worker. A gas line snaked through the development, feeding a handful of buildings. But the houses on the line rarely had enough gas to boil water, according to Sangrey's seventh child, Lorraine.

"We didn't have hot water for baths," Lorraine says, fishing a cigarette from a nearly empty pack. "But mom used to try to make it look nice. She'd put flowered paper on the wall. She always made sure we had stuff like that. Even though she had to go bumming for it, we always had things."

Irvin Sangrey left occasionally while the family lived on Mount Royal, sometimes to work on the railroad or sometimes to work as a migrant farm worker. When he left, Lorraine says her mother picked up the slack, finding additional odd jobs to make the \$125 monthly rent payment.

Leaving Mount Royal was tough. In 1971, a three bedroom home in Great Falls cost \$250 a month, Lucy Sangrey says, twice as much as their three room house on Mount Royal.

Discrimination was an even bigger hurdle.

"They really don't like to rent to Indians," Sangrey says, shaking her head matter-of-factly. "One time we were looking at a house and the landlord was so rude. He said, 'Why should I rent to you? You're Indians just like the ones I threw out. They'd bring different men in here every night, and I don't suppose you're any different.' Other landlords wanted to raise the rent."

Several Indian families left Hill 57 and Mount

Royal in the early 1970s, seeking better housing.

Today the shacks at Mount Royal are gone, replaced by \$100,000 homes that dot the hillside. Many of the Indian families have moved to the city's west and lower southside neighborhoods. Though American Indians comprise 4.3 percent of the Great Falls population, 15 percent of the people living in this 3-mile stretch of lower-income neighborhoods are Native American.

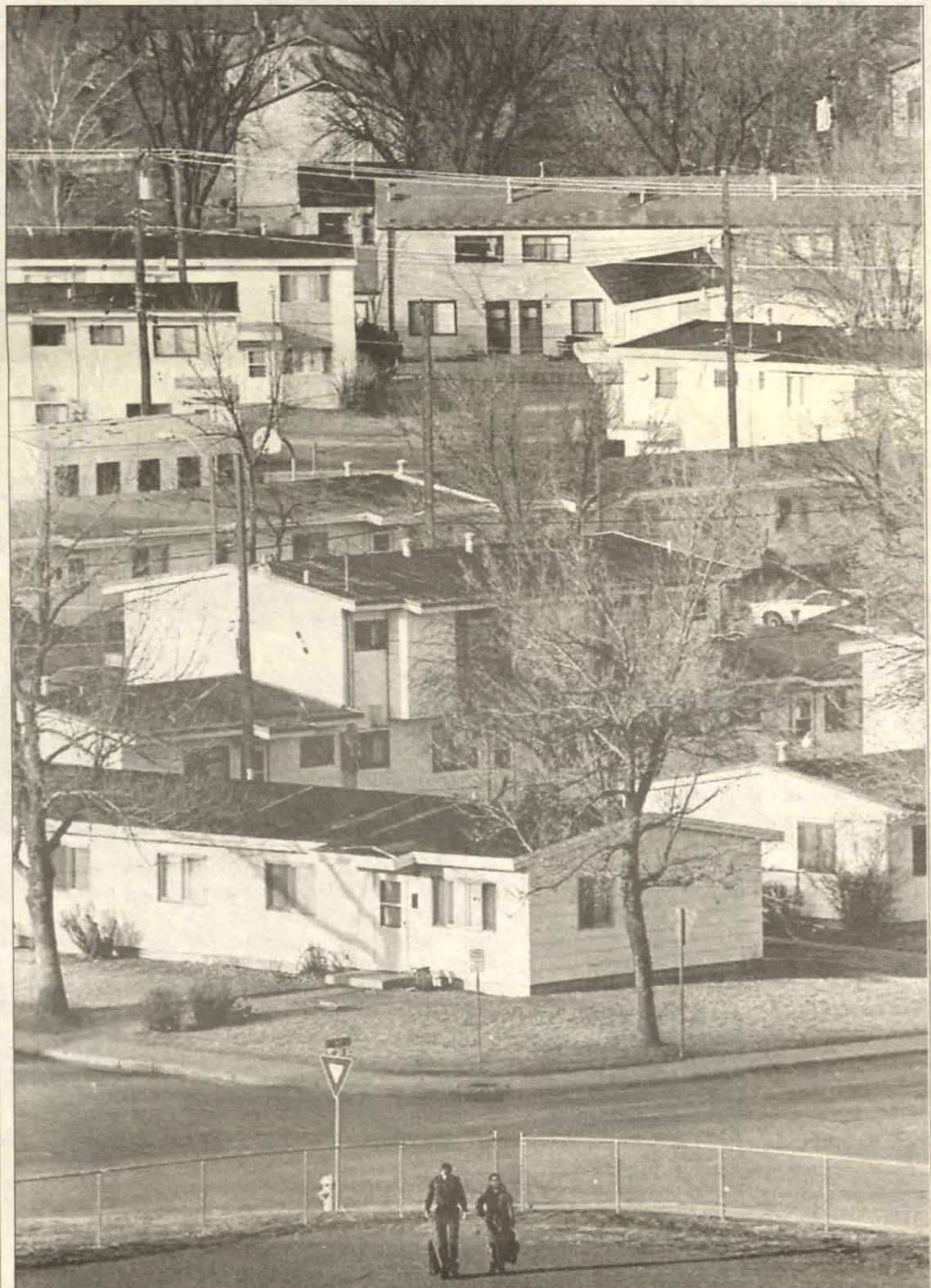
The ambitions of many American Indians looking for good-paying jobs in Great Falls are shackled by a lack of education. Census data from 1990 shows that among Native Americans in Great Falls, only about 12 percent have at least a high school education. So, like the Sangreys, most Native Americans might find work in Great Falls but find it hard to permanently escape poverty.

Four generations of Sangreys have come and gone in the city's low-income neighborhoods. Today many family members live in Parkdale, Great Falls' largest low-income housing project.

Nearly five city blocks of drab brown buildings stand in almost rank and file order in this housing development, which opened in 1940. Two police officers are assigned to Parkdale to patrol the streets, answering complaints or chasing off unwanted visitors. The windows of a small grocery store and a hair salon located on Parkdale's west flank are shielded with plywood and metal grating.

Of the roughly 950 Parkdale residents, 33 percent are Indian.

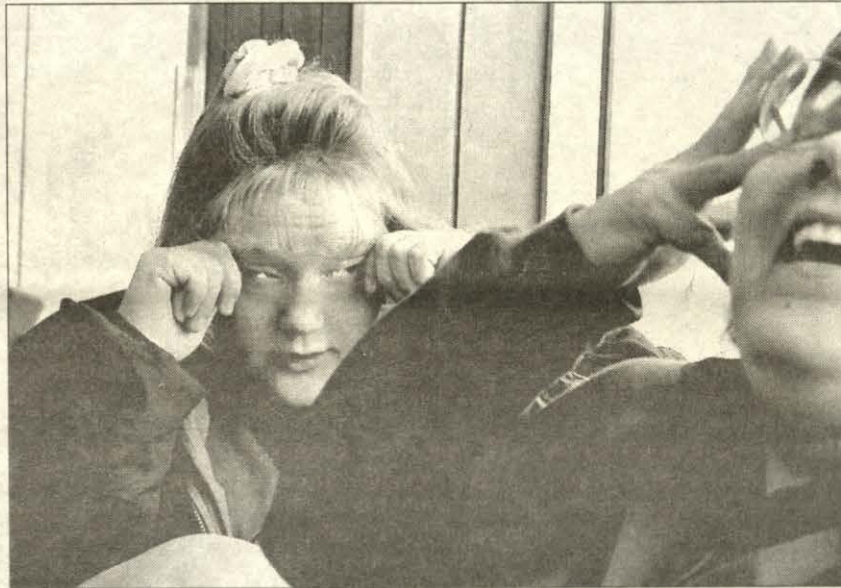
"Some people call this Little Browning because of all the Indians that moved to Parkdale from up there," Lucy Sangrey says, referring to the largest town on the Blackfeet Reservation.



The sprawling Parkdale Housing Project is adjacent to Great Falls High School, where most of Great Falls' Native American teens are educated. However, middle schoolers from Parkdale are bused across town to ensure the cultural diversity of the city's schools. Amanda Sangrey, 14, rides one of those busses from Parkdale every morning, while her friends who live outside Parkdale attend a school that's closer to the project. Amanda would prefer to go to school closer to home and her friends. The community police treat the project like a private property, monitoring the area and its youths' activities. Amanda and her peers are uneasy with the police presence, but many parents like the controlled atmosphere, especially at night.



Cassandra Sangrey takes care of her cousin, Skyler, who represents the fourth generation of Sangreys living in Parkdale. Skyler has lots of family around to see to her needs. Once a construction worker, Irving Sangrey (below), Lucy and Irvin's second child, stays in Parkdale collecting early-retirement pay because of an injury sustained in a domestic fight. Irving, something of a caretaker for his parents, runs errands and keeps records for them. At the eye doctor's office, Amanda Sangrey keeps her mother, Sylvia, entertained with facial contortions. Amanda's visit is covered by Medicare. Today, Amanda had to choose from a drawer of frames, not the ones nicely displayed on the walls. Sylvia says she once could pay the difference between the Medicare-funded frames and the designer ones the kids would want. Recent program cutbacks have eliminated that option.



Thirteen of Lucy Sangrey's children and grandchildren now live within earshot of her subsidized, two-bedroom apartment. Irvin, her 72-year-old husband, whom she separated from years ago, lives a block away.

For Sangrey, Parkdale is the answer to years of wondering what would become of her when she could no longer earn enough money to pay the rent.

"I used to worry about where I was going to go," she says. "And I had all those kids to take care of too. I still worry about them. I'll stay here, I guess. It's cheap to rent and the utilities are paid for. People don't bother me here."

Her children have their own reasons for living in subsidized housing.

Irving Sangrey, 48, moved to the project seven years ago — five years after his ex-wife's boyfriend stabbed a pencil into Irving's left eye, forcing him to quit his construction job.

Lorraine Sangrey, 40, applied for subsidized housing after her landlord stopped paying the mortgage on her apartment building. The bank repossessed the building 30 days later. She likes Parkdale's cheap rent, about \$81 a month. An occasional job cleaning apartments in Parkdale keeps her in spending money.

Lorraine Sangrey says she could leave subsidized housing if she wanted to, but would only make mini-



Lucy and Irvin Sangrey's sixth child, Lorraine, doesn't spend much time with either her sister across the street or her mother across the project. An argument persists over Irvin's responsibility to the family. Irvin and Lucy are separated, and he lives by himself in Parkdale only a few blocks away.

mum wage with her high school equivalency diploma. Finding a full-time job would probably result in an income-based rent increase, she says, pushing her one step closer to homelessness.

"Why should I leave? I like it here," she says. "This is the best place I've ever had. I've worked hard and I'm tired."

Lorraine's sister Sylvia Sangrey says she considers life in Parkdale to be a mixed blessing for herself and her three children, Michael, Amanda and Cassandra.

"Amanda had a few friends whose parents wouldn't drive through Parkdale after 5 p.m. and we'd have to meet them at the store," she says. "Actually, if I didn't live here I wouldn't let my kids go in here."

Although Lucy Sangrey says she never considered applying for public assistance as long as she could work, Sylvia Sangrey considers working low-paying jobs to be a hinderance. Low-income housing and other social programs enable her to buy her children "the things kids like," she says — the trendy shoes, skates, bikes and other goods that separate kids into haves and have-nots. If Amanda needs eye glasses, it's done, Sylvia says, but not if they leave public assistance, or Parkdale.

"I want my kids to have the things I didn't," she says. "And I want to be here for them when they get home from school. Isn't that what all parents want?"

The Sangreys say they've come a long way since the days of Hill 57 and Mount Royal. Parkdale is the best housing they have ever had. Still, because they can't afford the cost of better housing in Great Falls, the Sangreys say they're still one doorstep away from homelessness.

**Written by Mark Matthews
Photographed by Steven Adams**

Many Fort Peck Reservation communities, such as Wolf Point, take advantage of the economic boost provided by wheat farming and a few manufacturing facilities.

SEARCHING FOR HOME REMEDIES

Iva Longknife, director of the Fort Peck Housing Authority, is a tired woman. Her delicate smile, almost begrudgingly given, seems to demand all her strength. Her listless voice is barely audible. Her delicate features and sad brown eyes add to her aura of vulnerability. Iva Longknife is a woman besieged from all sides.

During her 10 years at the housing authority she has repeatedly explained the intricate, often puzzling details of Department of Housing and Urban Development rules to disgruntled renters, homeowners and impatient housing authority commissioners.

The stress has taken a physical toll on her, Longknife says as she slumps into her desk chair in her small white-walled office. The next day she is to take a 30-day leave of absence because of her medical problems.

Longknife's exhaustion reflects the state of Indian housing on

the Fort Peck Reservation where many houses are run down or boarded up.

Even newer homes often sit in muddy,

unkempt lots. Most of the homes were built with HUD funds. Many people are depressed about housing at Fort Peck. Longknife is depressed about her job.

But before she escapes to recuperate, Longknife must sit through one more monthly session of the 11-member Board of Housing Commissioners, the ones who make final housing decisions.

A handful of anti-Longknife commissioners say she is mismanaging the authority. They say they were elected by their peers to get things turned around and headed in the right direction.

Steve Lilley, the chairman of the commission, gestures to the four corners of the room when asked what's wrong with tribal housing. "The

problems begin here," he says. "The whole thing's mismanaged."

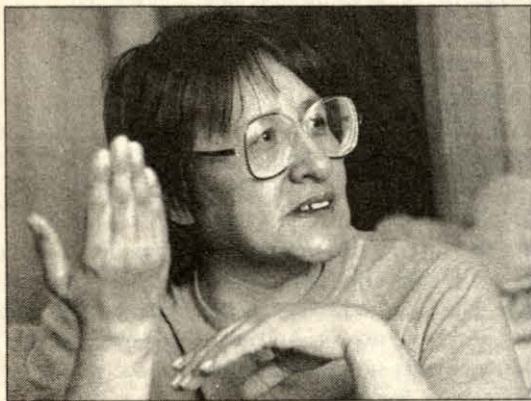
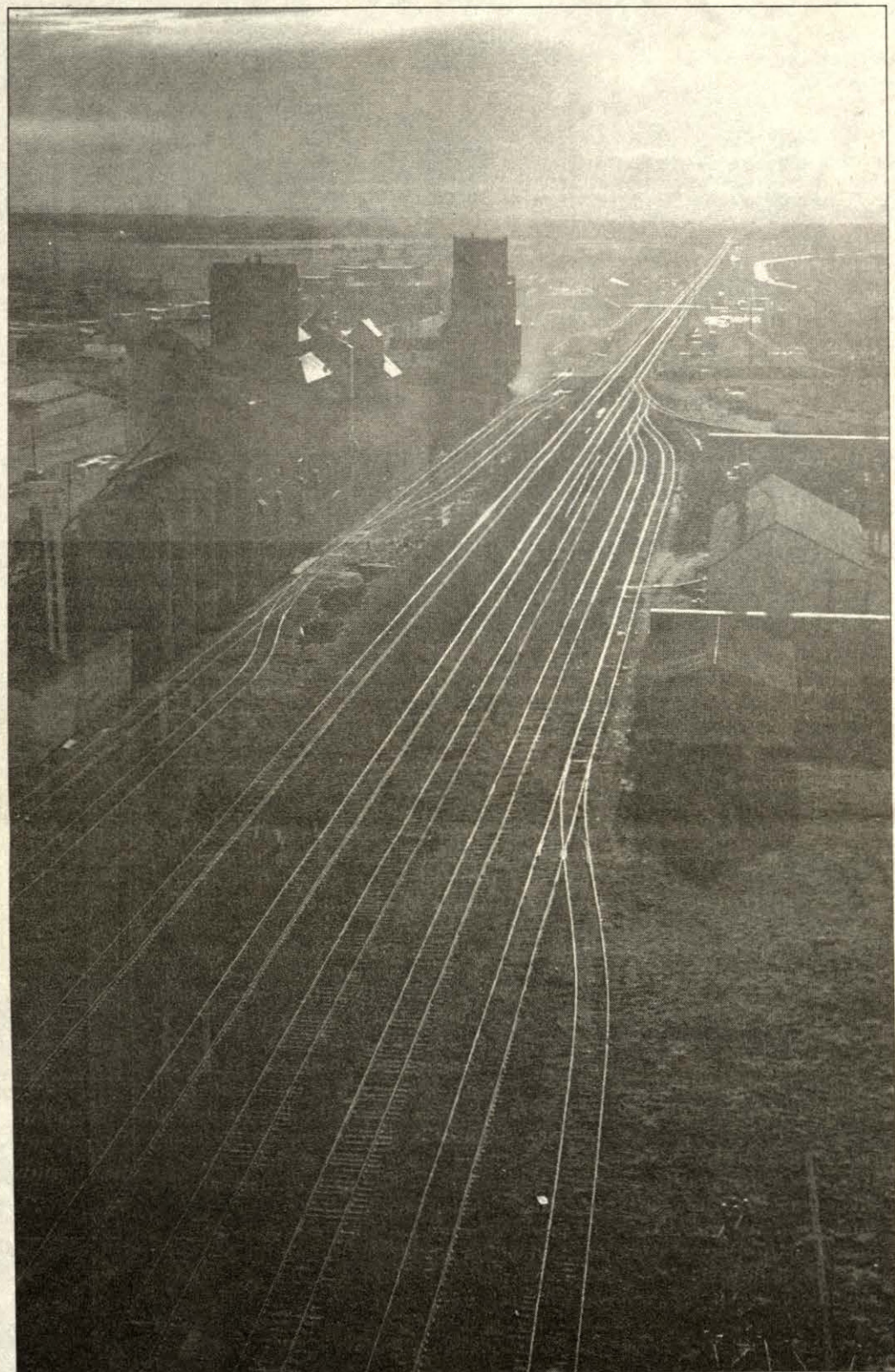
Longknife defends her policies by saying some of the commissioners are trying to micromanage the authority and won't let her do her job.

Scheduled on this day's agenda is a discussion of an official reprimand, by the commissioners, of Longknife's job performance. But before she is called on the carpet, there is the usual authority business.

Longknife silently listens as the commissioners once again break HUD rules by allowing a petitioner to move into a vacant house, even though she is not at the top of the waiting list.

Longknife, and those familiar with the commission, say this is common procedure. The commissioners say they are breaking the rules this time because two young children are involved who could end up homeless.

The commissioners' word is final. No one asks the status of the person who was at the top of the waiting list.



**"I'll never move
back into tribal
housing."**

— Linda Lezard,
a secretary for
the tribal planning board

The rental wasn't worth the money. The house wasn't well constructed and the bedrooms were very small."

— John Pipe
Tribal Executive
Councilman



Although she may have many personal friends, Longknife may also be one of the most unpopular officials on the reservation because of her job. Hampered by volumes of HUD regulations, she must often send seemingly contradictory, discouraging messages to the Assiniboine and Sioux peoples on the reservation.

Outside, with no understanding of the area's economic problems, often view the housing program as generous and wonder why people are complaining.

As everywhere, housing on the reservation is directly connected to employment. Without steady incomes, people can't make down payments or pay mortgages or rent. Ever since defense contracts were decreased, shutting down the tribes' A & S Industries, the reservation's largest employer, unemployment has skyrocketed to 60 percent.

To further complicate matters, housing, both private and tribal, is scarce. And what little there is in the private market in the small towns strung out along U.S. Highway 2 is often substan-

dard.

Since 1963 HUD has funded about 1,170 houses on the reservation. Of that total, 556 are low-rent units, 471 are mutual help homes which the occupants rent to buy, 29 houses are abandoned, and 114 homes have been fully paid for and turned over to the occupants.

The low-rent units provide roofs over the heads of the needy if they are lucky to get assigned to one. In March there were 389 people on the waiting list, which makes being related to a housing authority commission frequently a lucky break.

If no one living in a rental works, no rent is charged. The unemployed also receive a monthly rent credit which is used to pay utilities and household repair bills. If not used up, the credit carries over to the next month. At one time renters could receive the credit in cash and buy anything with it. One tribal member says many people used the money to prepare for Christmas. When HUD stopped that practice Iva Longknife's popularity rating took a sharp dip.

The good deal in the low-rent units quickly changes if anyone in the household is lucky enough to find a job. Wage earners must pay rent which amounts to 30 percent of their gross income.

If husband and wife find work, the rent is 30 percent of the combined gross income. And there is no rent cap. So if a son, daughter, uncle or niece residing in the house also find work, HUD charges 30 percent of their income too.

Linda Lezard, a secretary for the tribal planning board, saw her rent shoot up to \$851 a month as soon as her husband landed a well-paying job at A & S. At the time, supporting three daughters and five grandchildren, Lezard was hard-pressed to make ends meet despite the added income.

Because of the tight market for private rentals, Lezard ran up a \$6,000 bill in delinquent rent before she found a trailer to buy.

The family finished paying off the debt last December.

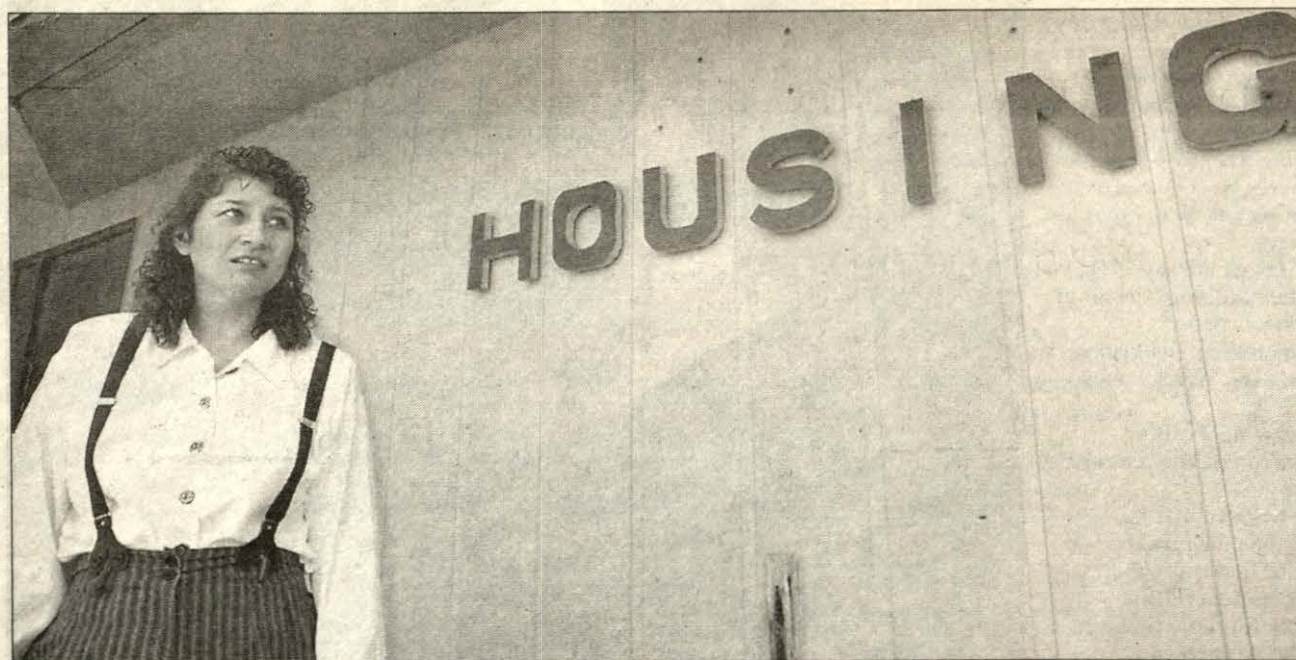
The 10-member family continues to live in the three-bedroom trailer. "I'll never move back into tribal housing because of what happened," Lezard says.

HUD's uncapped rent policy has affected others, including Tribal Executive Councilman John Pipe. Unemployed in 1985, Pipe moved into a low-rent three-bedroom unit with his wife and two children. At the time he paid no rent and lived off welfare and Social Security. After graduating from Fort Peck Community College with an associate of arts degree in business administration, Pipe won a seat on the tribal council in 1990. He immediately got a rent bill for \$500 a month.

"The rental wasn't worth the money," Pipe says. "The house wasn't well constructed and the bedrooms were very small."

Rather than throw good money away, Pipe gave up the rental to look for a private home to rent, thinking he would stay at his mother's house for a few weeks. Pipe's family ended up sharing the 20-foot-by-20-foot cottage with his mother for a year. "I ended up sleeping on the couch. Can you believe it?" Pipe says.

Pipe now lives in a mutual help home. For the employed it can be as sweet a deal as the low-



IVA LONGKNIFE: NO LONGER AUTHORIZING HOUSING

Iva Grainger Longknife was fired as the director of the Fort Peck Housing Authority April 19, 1995. When the vote split 5-5, commission chairman Steve Lilley broke the tie. Lilley told the Wotanin Wowapi, the reservation newspaper, that Longknife was fired "for her lack of administrative capacity. She did not follow through with the directives of the board of commissioners." Longknife has filed a wrongful dis-

charge grievance of and sexual harassment charges against the commissioners. No date for a hearing has been set. While awaiting the hearing, Longknife is living on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation where her husband, Edward Longknife, is head of that reservation's housing authority.

When Joe Beston's income was low, so was his rent. Now that he has found a job that can support his family, he can no longer afford to pay 30 percent of his income in rent.

-rentals are to the unemployed. To qualify, a family of three must earn at least \$16,500 a year. Larger families must earn more. Plus they must show a history of maintaining employment.

Even though there are few jobs on the reservation that pay well, 79 families were waiting in March for a mutual help home.

Once assigned, a family must donate 15 percent of its monthly income for 25 years to pay it off.

If people in mutual help homes run into bad luck and their income decreases they can hold onto the home by paying a \$50 a month administrative fee. If they pay that fee for 25 years, which amounts to \$15,000, the home is signed over to them.

In addition, the homes are renovated before they are signed over. Hot water heaters and stoves are replaced, plumbing is updated, and windows and doors are repaired. After the renovation the homeowners are on their own.

Even though they may own the home, they do not own the land, which is held in trust by the federal government for the tribe. Homeowners lease the plots at minimal rates.

Joe Beston Jr. has followed the routine of living in a low-rent house while unemployed, to finding work and moving into a mutual help home and paying less mortgage than he did rent. The irony of the situation doesn't escape him.

"If you live in low-rent," Beston says, "you live like a king so long as you don't work. Your house bills get paid and you can eat with food stamps.

"And if you're lucky enough to get a mutual help home to go along with a good job, you pay a lot less rent than you would in a low-rental.

"Something's screwed around somewhere."

There are two problems with mutual help homes. People don't get to pick the home they want; they can only pick the town they want to live in. There aren't enough homes to go around, so many pin their hopes on whom they know on the housing commission.

Which makes Iva Longknife cringe before every meeting.

Another major source of distress for Longknife is that many low-renters who do find work won't pay their rent. Delinquent renters in March owed more than \$—?— to the housing authority. Most of the money will never be collected as debtors either leave the reservation, move in secretly with other family members, or find private housing to rent.

"People think housing is an entitlement," Longknife says. "That the government should provide it free. But free housing was never written into the original treaty."

What really discourages Longknife even more than freeloaders is the poor condition of many of the tribal houses. "Tenant abuse is quite common," she says.

In March, 29 units were boarded up because the housing authority didn't have enough money to fix them up. The reason for the short cash flow is the delinquent rent.

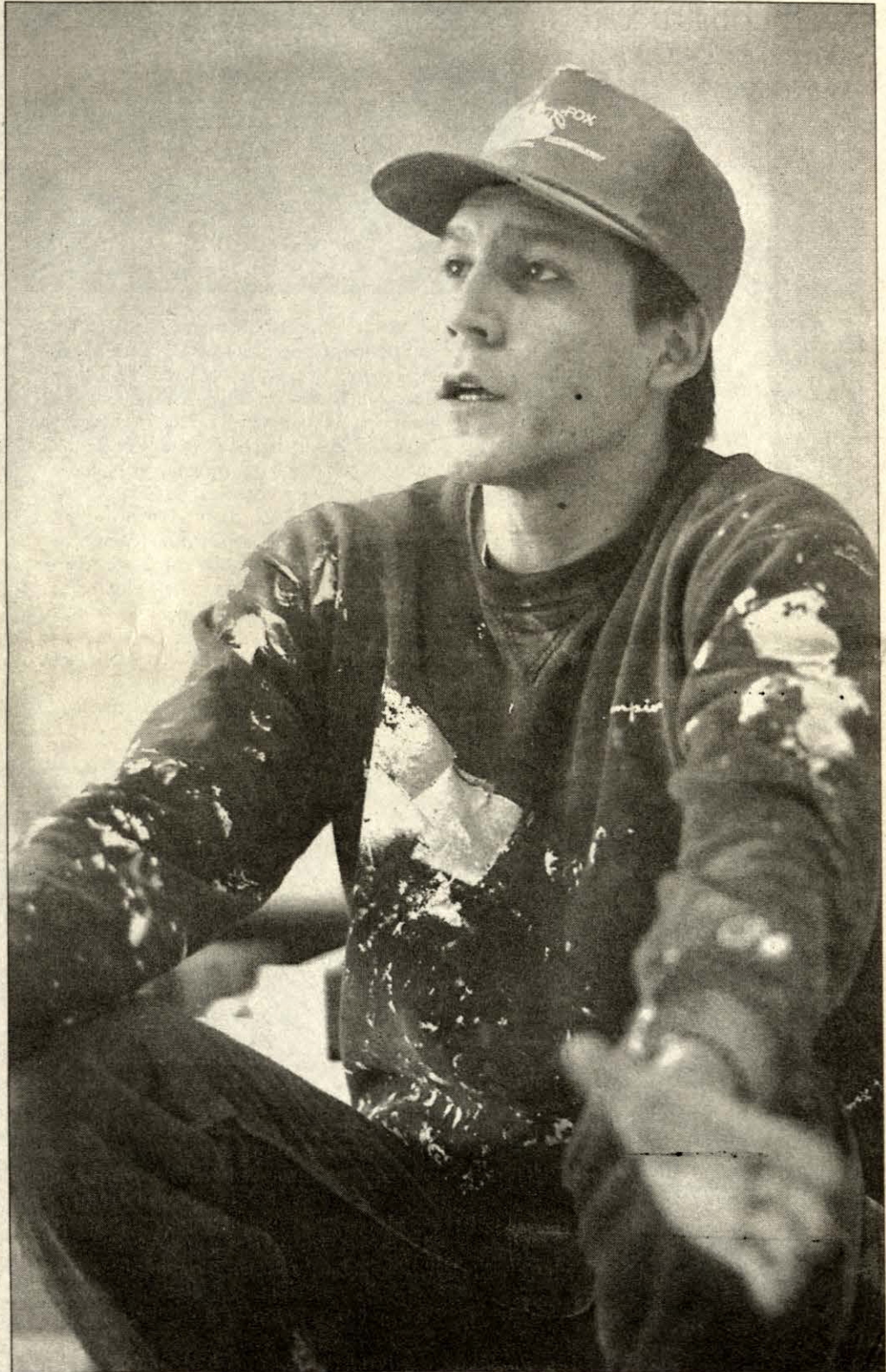
The housing authority employs four men to clean up and repair abandoned houses. Four others do routine maintenance on the other rentals. It costs from \$1,500 to \$5,000 and takes about three weeks to get an abandoned unit fit for residency again.

In the meantime people continue to clamor for more housing.

Whatever was said to Longknife during the meeting isn't known, since the commissioners declared an executive session and sent everyone out of the room, even Longknife's husband.

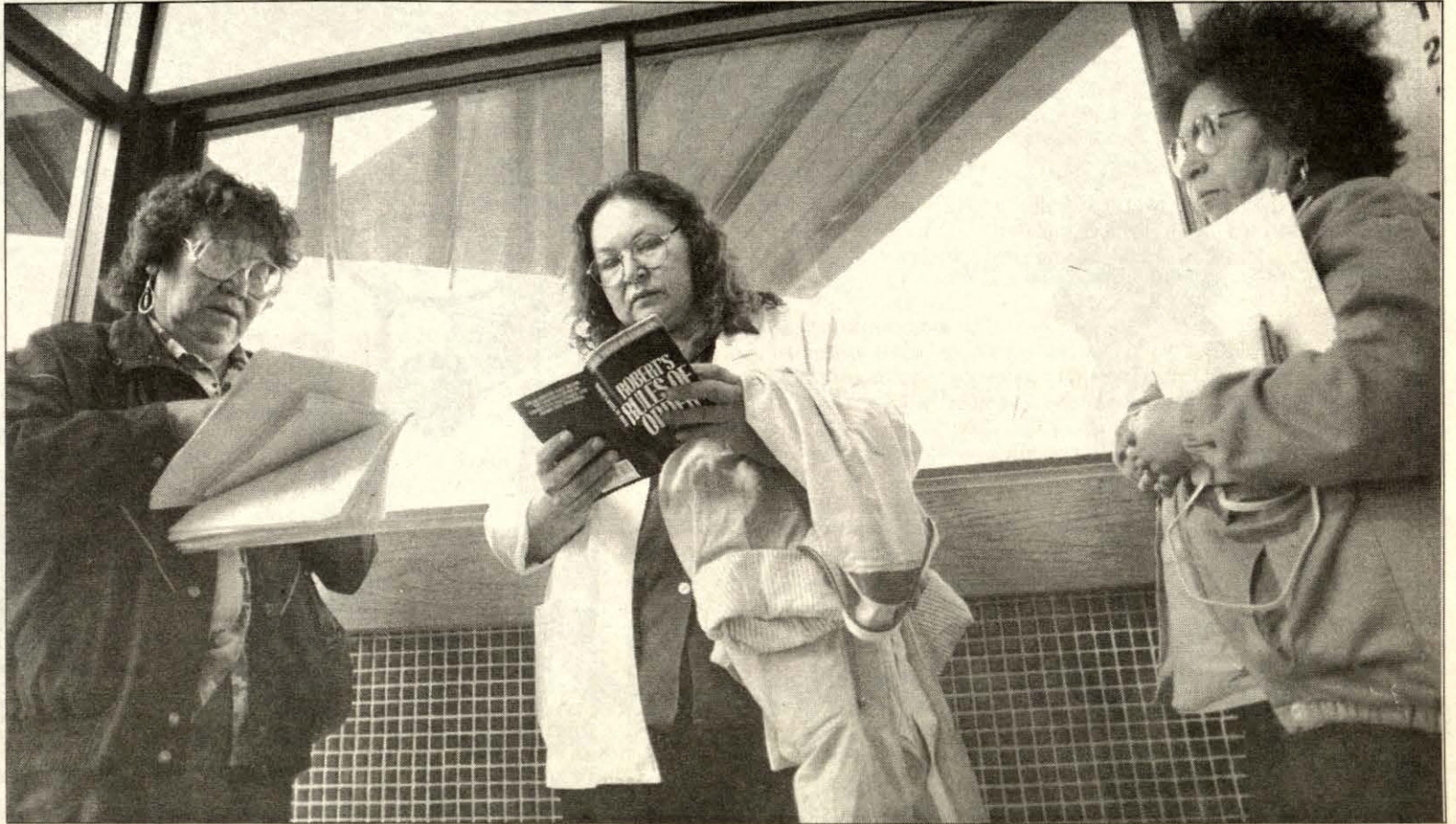
When the session ended Longknife emerged from the meeting in tears.

Iva Longknife's long ordeal was apparently over. She had been fired.



"If you live in low-rent, you live like a king so long as you don't work. Your house bills get paid and you can eat with food stamps.... Something's screwed around somewhere."

— Joe Beston Jr.



FORT PECK TENANTS' BOOMING MOUTHPIECE

The 10-woman tenants union uses tribal board meetings to document and voice the complaints and needs of reservation residents



Midge Clancy, Dallas Teboe and Agnes Wilson prepare to defend the rights of tenants before a Fort Peck tribal board meeting. After three rent increases in a year Teboe organized a union and often speaks to tribal officials about renters' concerns.

For most of her life, Dallas Teboe, like most tribal members of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeast Montana, minded her own business and ignored reservation politics.

But after her rent was raised three times in one year, doubling the amount she paid, she got up the nerve to complain to the tribal housing authority. There, a worker explained to her the Department of Housing and Urban Development rules which demanded the rent increase because her income rose and because her home was converted from electric to gas heat, which supposedly saved her money.

Teboe, an optician at the tribal health center, says she felt frustrated. She says she didn't see much in savings in her heating bill, but found there was no way to challenge the regulations. She also began paying closer attention to the numerous housing complaints she heard from other tribal members.

When housing authority workers told her she should start up a tenants union, that's exactly what she did.

"I saw a need that wasn't being met," she says.

Round-faced, with her long black hair permed into cascading curls, Teboe chuckles when she says she used to be a quiet, shy person. A mother and a poet, Teboe breathes deeply and places her hand over her heart as if still overwhelmed that she is now a spokeswoman for others too frightened to speak out against tribal practices.

To get the tenants union started, Teboe began

knocking on doors in the tribal housing projects five years ago. "And what I ran into was a lot of fear," she says. "People are scared of the housing authority. They don't want to go over there and work out their problems. They'd rather stay away, ignore the problems, and eventually get evicted."

Only 10 tribal members, all women, currently belong to the union. The union's secretary, Midge Clancy, is discouraged that more people are not banding together to fight for their rights.

"Native Americans have been living in oppression for a long time," she says. "First from the white man, and now we are living in oppression because of tribal politics."

Teboe says that HUD projects with their accompanying subsidies and regulations are harming the reservation's Assiniboine and Sioux peoples.

Credit rent, which pays utility bills for the unemployed, only encourages people not to work, Teboe says.

Moreover, she believes that the formula that automatically raises the rent of a person who finds a job or gets a raise also discourages potential job seekers.

"It's ruining the Indian way of thinking," Teboe says. "It used to be that men took care of the family. Now HUD is telling him not to work, but live for free instead. With credit rent, the men stay home. This takes away their pride of being the head of the family."

Teboe also wants to see the men help out with the tenants union. "I don't know why they're not



getting involved," she says. "But it's bad that they aren't. It's harder for us women to open doors. The tribal authorities don't take us as seriously as they would men."

However, the 10 women have risen to the challenge. To get access to the tribal housing commission meetings a few years ago, Teboe had to get HUD to order the commission to open its doors or risk losing federal money.

The 10-member commission, made up of representatives elected from the tribal towns situated along the Hi-Line, hold office for two years. Subcommittees, made up of commissioners from individual towns, compile the lists of people waiting for homes. The entire commission meets once a month to officially decide who moves where when housing opens up to rent or buy.

Commissioner Rita Talks Different, representing the town of Frazer, says the board often abuses its power. "They often skip over people at the top of the waiting list to award scarce housing to relatives or friends," she says.

Talks Different, who supports her three daughters and two grandchildren in her home on a \$150 a week salary, says housing commissioners can make families comfortable or miserable. She calls the position a thankless job.

"Even the little children come up to me when I visit the school to ask me if I have found a house for their mothers yet," she says.

Although she doesn't blame the tenants union, Talks Different says that "grievances before the commission are now the big thing."

Teboe and Clancy are writing a code of ethics that would rein in the commissioners. "They think they're a power all on their own," Teboe says.

If the code is adopted, the commissioners would pledge not to abuse their power to advance the interests of family or friends; refrain from making decisions concerning the housing authority as indi-

viduals; and refrain from threatening or intimidating fellow commissioners or members of the public while in office.

And to that the commissioners respond?

The code must be approved by the tribal executive council.

Another of Teboe's projects is to turn the union into a resident management corporation. As a corporation, Teboe's group could take over management of some housing programs. One project she already is eyeing is a three-block section of tribal housing located behind the tribal clinic in Wolf Point.

Named Pumpkin Hill because all the houses were originally painted bright orange, the project may soon be leveled by bulldozers because its sewer system is malfunctioning. Aware of the scarcity of housing, Teboe wants to fix the sewers, renovate the homes, and make sure they are maintained better, by screening potential renters.

"We wouldn't allow any drinkers or partyers to move in," she says.

Although the fledgling union has filled a void in the community and inspired some Indians to stand up against the tribal authorities, Teboe realizes the union still has a long way to go.

"We still have little or no voice at the local level," she says.

Teboe, believing a statewide coalition of tribal tenants unions will make the Fort Peck council pay more attention to them, is helping form the Montana InterTribal Coalition of Residential Organizations.

She is working with five other Montana reservations. "Some of the other tribes, like the Blackfeet, even have men involved," she says.

Teboe believes that even a statewide coalition may not be enough.

"We'll go national next," Teboe says. "Then those big shots in D.C. who don't care about our problems might listen."

A home-made basketball court sits near a neighborhood of Poplar, Mont., recommended for demolition. Teboe, who believes there isn't enough housing on the reservation, would like to see the tenants union manage these old homes while new ones are built elsewhere.

What I ran into was a lot of fear. People are scared of the housing authority. They don't want to go over there and work out their problems."

— Dallas Teboe
tenants' leader

HOUSING DIRECTOR STRIVES FOR TRIBAL SELF SUFFICIENCY

Finding a balance, Bob Gauthier of the Salish-Kootenai wants his housing authority to run like a business, but must bow to Indian tradition even if it isn't practical.



The unassuming home looks like many others on the Flathead Indian Reservation. It's a one-story structure with light blue siding that complements the azure sky on this crisp Montana morning. A pathway lined with rails guides guests to the front door. Trees dot the one-acre site on which the house is centered.

But this house is different from others on the reservation, a Salish-Kootenai tribal elder insists to a group gathered outside the home. This house, he says, is filled with evil because someone died here.

Bob Gauthier stands in the back yard, shifting his heavy-set, 6-foot frame from foot to foot as he listens quietly to the elder's pleas that the residence be moved from this land that once belonged to his great-grandfather.

It is an argument between white modernity and Indian tradition, between the American way and the Native American way, and it is not a new one for the director of the Salish-Kootenai Housing Authority in northwest Montana.

Although sometimes frustrated by his elders' traditions, Gauthier always defers to their advice and respects their spiritual wisdom. Only one-quarter Kootenai himself, Gauthier does not noticeably look Native American, but is sensitive to his Indian culture.

Indeed, as the housing director for 12 years, Gauthier has found progress only through balance. So he walks many lines and bridges many gaps.

He represents the Salish-Kootenai tribes as their housing director, but as a successful, 10-year restaurant owner he also maintains a friendly business image for all reservation residents — more than 80 percent of whom are white.

He works to better his tribe's housing, yet many of his projects are designed to improve Indian housing all over the Northwest.

He wants his housing authority to be run like an efficient business, but chooses to bow to Indian tradition even when it isn't practical.

Now, standing in the center of a piece of land hallowed by Indian tradition but currently used for tribal housing, Gauthier listens and tries to find a compromise.

It takes energy, which fortunately is not something the housing director lacks.

"If you want to keep up with Bob, you'd better wear your running shoes," says Carrie Irvine, a staff member at the housing authority.

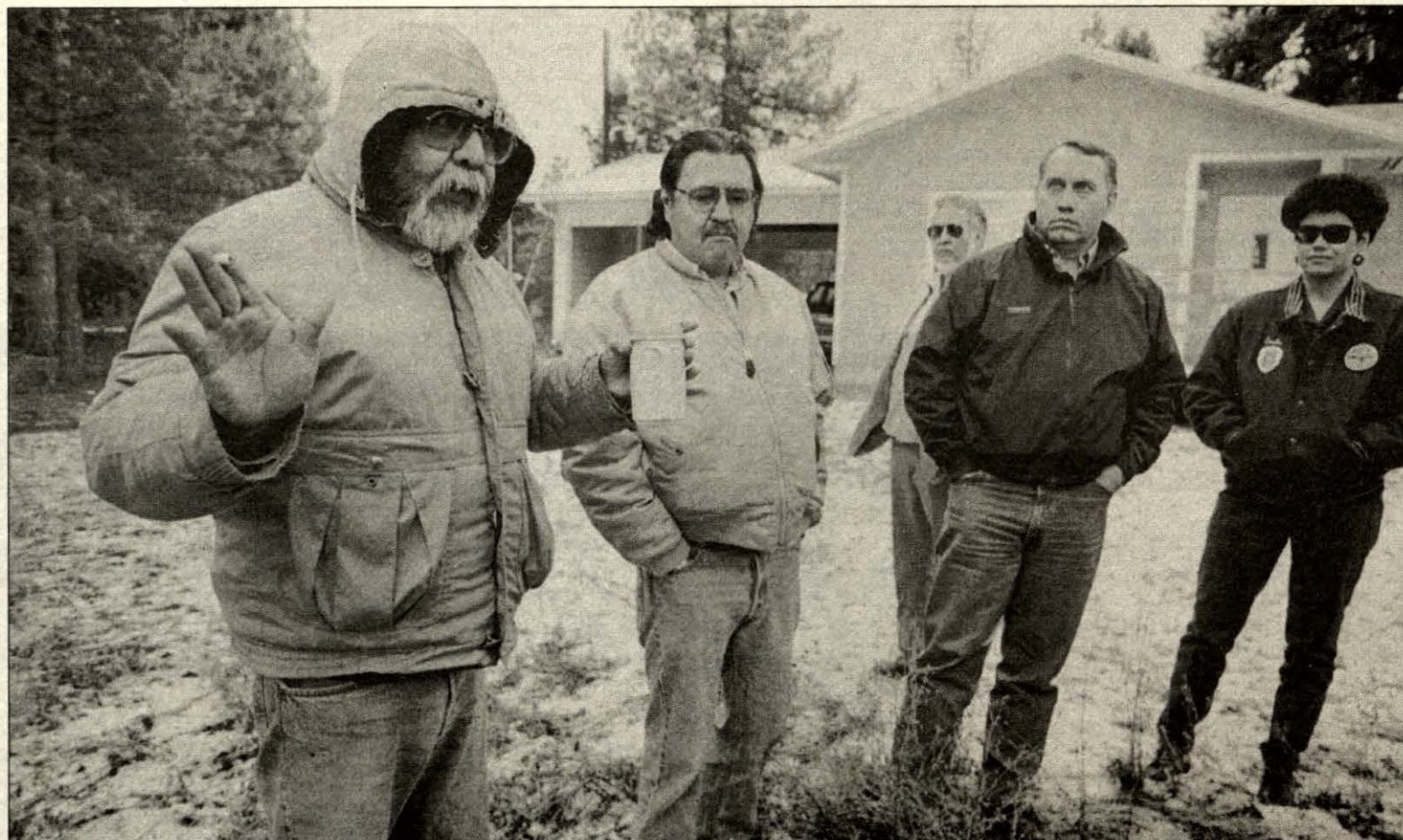
Indeed, Gauthier is rarely seen relaxing. When he is forced to remain immobile, he shuffles in his hand two silver dollars, one of which belonged to his mother. He keeps the dollars always in his pocket.

Praised by colleagues for his honesty and good business sense, Gauthier is always on the go, traveling off the reservation about seven weeks of the year and traveling around the reservation in his pickup a good portion of the other 45 weeks.

Even his adversaries recognize Gauthier's energy and commitment.

"He supports his beliefs strongly," says Mike Hutchins, a Lake County commissioner who often knocks heads with Gauthier. "He's an asset who is sometimes a detriment, but always highly respected. He has a hard line to walk."

Gauthier is a man of interesting contradictions. Although always sincere in his beliefs and serious about daily duties, Gauthier's mood is more often than not lighthearted, and good-natured ribbing is a norm with his colleagues.



Gauthier and the housing authority board of directors listen as tribal member Victor Charlo describes historical and spiritual uses of land that once was his grandfather's.

Written by Heidi Williams
Photographed by Chris Jacobs

His office is spotless and always ringing with the twang of country tunes that come from a small black radio on his window sill. Yet, occasionally he will haul out a "memorabilia folder," messy with clippings and cards and thick with disorganization.

Although constantly busy, he keeps his door open and visitors are free to come and go at their leisure. He seems both competent and haphazard.

But the double impression can be clarified easily by looking at Gauthier's long list of accomplishments.

In 1986, he created an insurance company which now serves close to 70,000 Indian housing units.

He is the first and only Native American to serve on the board of the Seattle Federal Home Loan Bank, meeting with board members once a month and overseeing an \$18 billion regional budget.

In 1992, he was appointed chairman of a national commission on housing that published a report for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) on ways to improve the housing situation for American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians.

Gauthier said one of the commission's main goals is to decrease reservations' dependency on HUD.

"The thing that jumped out at us was that private markets weren't doing their share in Indian country," he says. "We want to find ways to bring these private markets in."

For Gauthier, success in this area boils down to the opportunity for tribal members to own houses.

To create this opportunity, Gauthier is nearly ready to launch his latest project — a lending cooperative which will make home loans to Indians through all seven Montana Indian housing authorities. He plans to begin making loans sometime this summer.

Currently, the only other Indian lending organization in the country is in Browning, Mont.

"Home equity is the one investment most people realize," Gauthier says. "Not everyone can be an expert in stocks and bonds, but traditionally if you buy a home, it creates not only a sense of belonging, of owning a piece of the community, but many times it creates financial opportunities through the equity."

Gauthier says it is difficult for Indians to get loans through traditional banks because most banks will not make loans on trust land, which is land given to the Indians by the government when they first moved onto reservations and on which they do not pay taxes.

As a result of this difficulty in getting loans, Indians are often forced to rely heavily on HUD grants.

Gauthier hopes his efforts will initiate tribal self-sufficiency and a break from HUD dependency.

"HUD is not designed to assist medium and moderate-income families," he says. "It's designed for lower-income families. But because there's no alternative (for getting a home) in Indian country, they've been forced into fulfilling that role and it's caused a tremendous battle for units."

The waiting list for housing assistance on the Flathead numbers more than 400. Gauthier estimates that 150 of the families on the list and 150 currently in programs would be eligible for loans through the new lending cooperative.

Although Gauthier says the greatest causes of frustration among tribal members is a lack of understanding of how the available housing programs work and why the waiting list exists at all, he also says housing is in much better shape than on many other reservations.

"Our housing authority is very productive," he says. "We try to run it like a business, yet have some compassion at the same time. You'd be

hard-pressed to find one of our units that's not in good shape. I'm not saying they're not out here, but there's not very many."

Indeed, the Salish-Kootenai Housing Authority's reputation is nationally recognized. Henry Cisneros, secretary of HUD, praised the housing authority in February as "not only one of the best tribal housing authorities, but one of the best housing authorities in the nation — period."

In fact, the Flathead has long held a rep-

utation as a forerunner in reservation policy. It was the first reservation to organize its own government in the 1930s under the Indian Reorganization Act, one of a handful of tribes to make a go at concurrent tribal-state jurisdiction in the 1950s and one of only 10 tribes in 1976 to try a nationwide project of increased self-management as part of the Indian Self-Determination Act.

Gauthier remembers, though, when new ideas were not always so well-received. When he came on in 1982, HUD was much more strict about how its money could be spent on reservations.

Gauthier said he broke HUD rules on more than one occasion during the first six years — building playgrounds, parks and installing street

lights — all contrary to HUD mandates.

"We're doing the same things now that we did then, but now we're not violating the regulations," he says.

Gauthier credits much of his success to the healthy state of his housing authority when he came aboard, and to the support of the tribal council, which is "kind of unusual" on reservations.

Perhaps even more unusual is Gauthier's commitment to improving the housing situation for other tribes.

"I think that's part of our responsibility," he says. "When we get something that works here, we share it."

Gauthier says even the lending cooperative will have a much bigger impact on other Montana reservations than on his own. Helping each other is crucial to the tribes' survival, he says, and so he works with the other housing authorities on a regular basis, organizing projects such as buying large numbers of refrigerators to cut the individual price almost in half.

"We've been able to do stuff like that just by getting together and dealing with problems in a group organization rather than individually," he says. "You know, if you don't look to other reservations, there aren't many experts with

practical experience specifically on a reservation."

Often, though, Gauthier must turn his full attention back to his own tribe and deal with its problems wholeheartedly, as he does on this cold afternoon in the back yard of the vacant house.

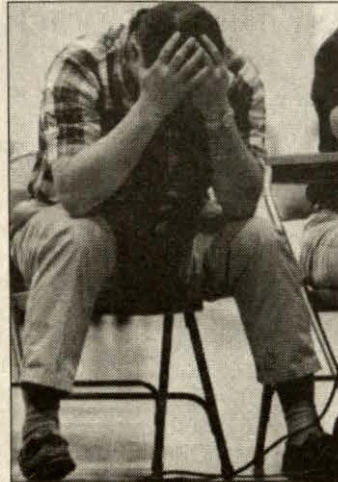
Gauthier listens as the tribal elder has his say, then he and members of his housing board drive to Little Joe's restaurant, where they hold a board meeting over dinner.

They discuss what may now happen to the disputed house, the fate of which lies in the hands of the tribal council.

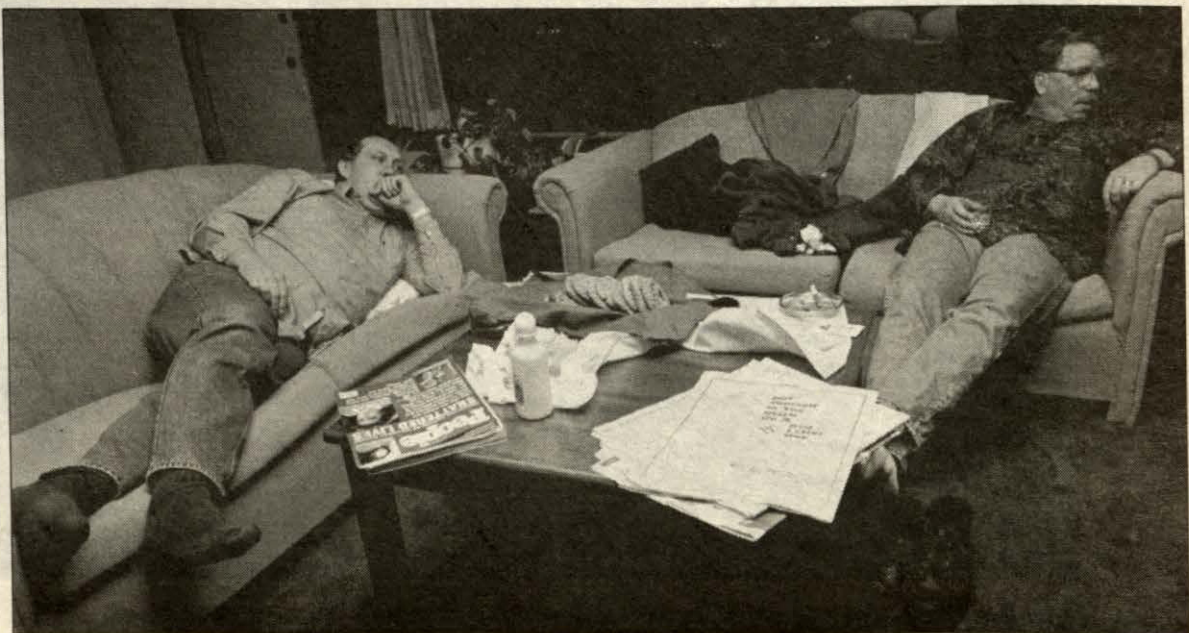
Soon, though, the mood lightens and Gauthier's heavy chuckle carries clearly to the far end of the table. Good-natured jokes are told about other tribes, and the stories start.

Housing board member Brent Salois leans over to a visitor and says conspiratorially, "Indian people find humor where Caucasians wouldn't. Their threshold of pain is very high, because pain is natural to them. We can laugh about stuff we think is kind of tragic."

Here, Gauthier easily lets go of the afternoon's somber mood. Once again, he is lighthearted.



Gauthier holds his head in dismay while watching the girls basketball team play in the HUD tournament in Denver.



Gauthier and long-time friend Bill Nibbelink, housing director for the Flandreau S.D., housing authority.

FLATHEAD RESERVATION

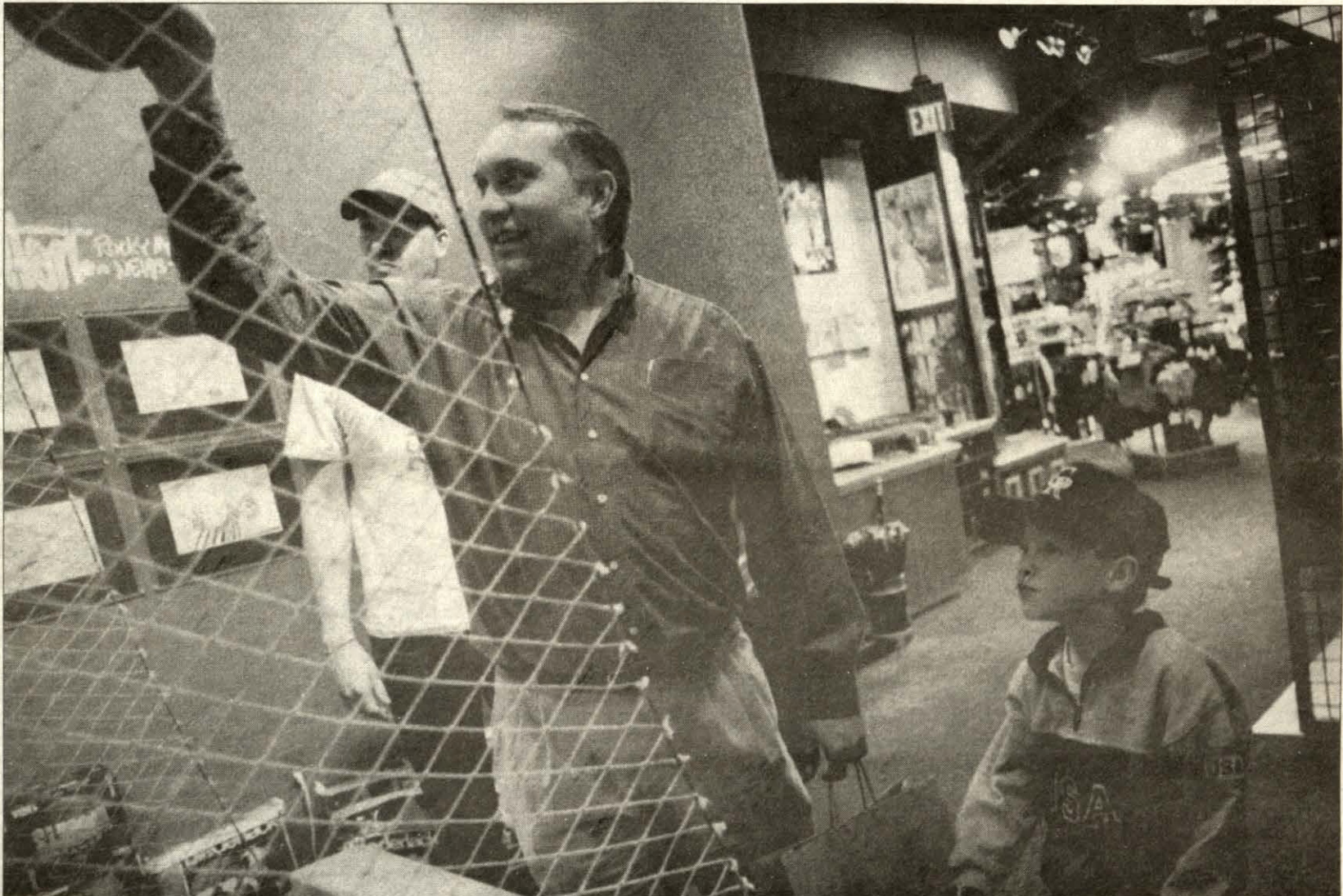
Someplace
to call **Home**

Gauthier led HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros on a tour of Flathead Reservation housing projects and business sites in February. Here, they leave Gauthier's restaurant after a lunch stop. Gauthier challenges a boy to a shooting match in a sporting goods store during a shopping trip.



“If you want to keep up with Bob, you'd better wear your running shoes.”

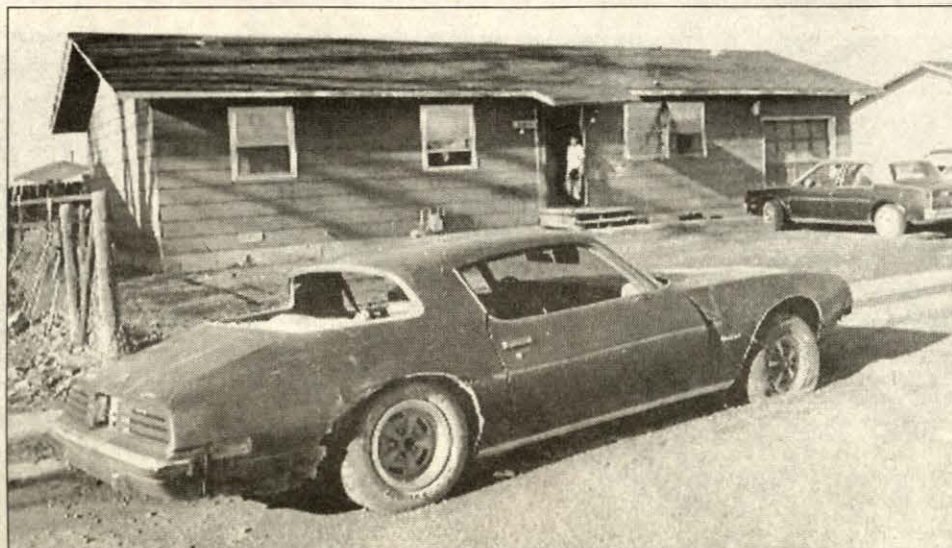
— Carrie Irvine,
housing authority staff



Gauthier's daughters, Charmaine, 18 and Rochelle, 17, have accompanied him on his frequent travels throughout the country since he began working for the housing authority. Here Gauthier takes time out from the Youth Basketball Classic/United Native American Housing Authority weekend in Denver to spend some time with his younger daughter Rochelle.

Frustrated by long waiting lists for tribal housing, 13 members of the Bad Bear family are resigned to sharing a broken-down three-bedroom home.

OVERCROWDING



Weston Bad Bear leaves while his mother, his aunt and two uncles will spend their afternoon in the overcrowded house his grandparents have been renting since 1973.

When the day is over and it's time for sleep, the Bad Bears' living room undergoes a startling transformation.

Games littering the living room floor are piled under a desk. Mattresses are pulled from a back hallway and positioned between two couches. Pillows are rearranged, blankets are passed around and the television is turned off.

The living room becomes a makeshift bedroom in which five members of the Bad Bear family struggle for comfort.

Shirley Bad Bear and her husband, Thomas, have lived in the cramped three-bedroom house in Crow Agency, which was built with money from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, since 1973. The 13-member family living there now includes the Bad Bears' three children and two of their spouses, and six grandchildren.

Houses for sale and rent are scarce on the Crow Reservation in southwestern Montana and many families live as the Bad Bears do.

Burton Pretty on Top, a tribal spokesman and spiritual leader, says the overcrowding is due in part to the deep-rooted tribal tradition that Crow families willingly share whatever space they have.

"We are a loving culture. We take care of each other," he says. "This is the most basic principle of our traditional teachings — we don't ever turn people away."

Yet despite Pretty on Top's beliefs, that loving culture has changed, says Randine Baker, a social worker on the reservation. She says the tribe faces serious social problems due to overcrowding.

"When you're living in a house with little

space and no privacy, as many of us do, you are going to have more violence, more sexual abuse, more alcoholism," says Baker.

Baker says that sexual abuse and domestic violence are issues that are especially hard for the Crow Tribe to confront.

"Nobody is going to talk openly when they know the whole tribe is going to know their secret," she says. "These families are huge. We don't have nuclear families here; everyone's connected in some way."

Baker also sees parents shrugging off their responsibilities to older children when the stress of a full house becomes overwhelming.

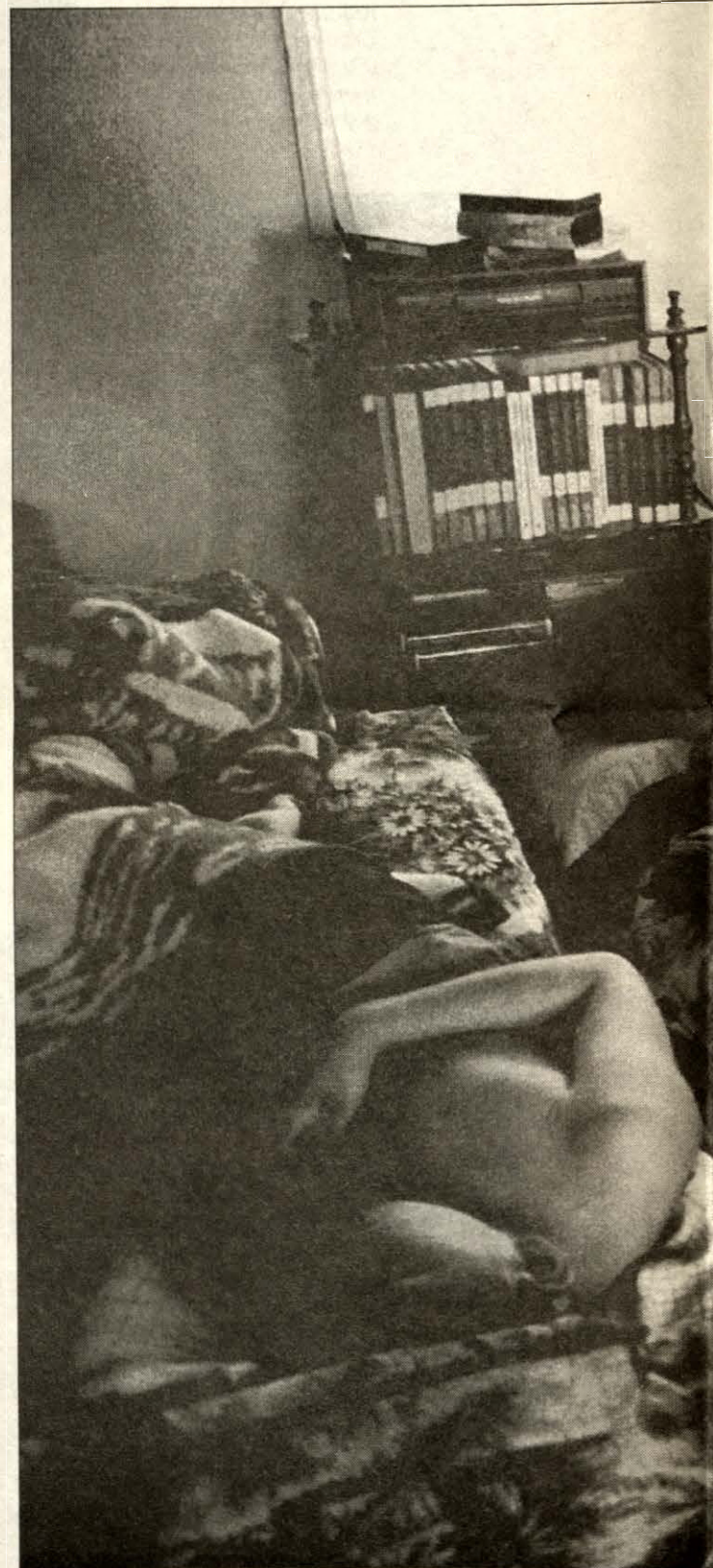
"Someone is always at home to watch the kids," Baker says. "In many cases I see moms and dads going off to get drunk with no worries because someone's at home."

Cedric Black Eagle, executive director of the Crow Housing Authority, acknowledges that a common complaint among those seeking a new house is that overcrowding is ruining their families.

"Parents want their kids to have their own rooms so they can give their marriage a little privacy," he says.

But the scarcity of housing and the resulting overcrowding on this reservation is not merely a result of insufficient resources. It is also the consequence of years of corruption and mismanagement.

In the late 1980s, an investigation of the tribal government by a federal grand jury resulted in guilty pleas and convictions of several prominent members of the housing authority, including two former executive directors, the finance director, a maintenance supervisor and the vice chairman.



**Written by
Tara Tuchscherer
Photographed by
Rebecca Huntington**

Someplace
to call **Home**

ON THE CROW



Alicia Bad Bear tiptoes past the mattress where her Aunt Diane sleeps with her husband and infant son. Weston Bad Bear curls up on the "short bed" that becomes the living room couch once he rises.

Housing officials testified that making fraudulent contracts was the way business was done at the housing authority and receiving kickbacks for bogus expense checks was an unspoken, well-established practice.

Black Eagle says that during the four years surrounding the indictments, 1989 to 1993, HUD cut the tribe's housing money and several of its programs.

"During that time the housing authority was considered high risk," he says.

The high risk status was lifted two years ago when HUD officials were convinced that the housing authority had become a legitimate operation. Greater local autonomy was restored.

But despite the renewed flow of HUD money, the housing problem has not been alleviated because the need for housing only grew while the funding was in limbo. A typical home on the reservation still packs several generations under one roof.

The number of people who complain about housing far outnumbers the number who come in each year and apply for it, says Rosella Stewart, occupancy specialist at the Tribal Housing Authority.

The waiting list for renting or owning a house now stands at 243 families, Stewart says. But the inactive list, where families have not reapplied but still don't have their own houses, nears 800. That's an enormous number on a reservation where about 5,500 of nearly 11,000 enrolled tribal members live.

None of the Bad Bears is on the waiting list.

"We apply every once in a while," says Edwina Bad Bear, who lives in her parents' low-rent HUD home with her three children. "But we're not going to get a house. Why would we? They can't even fix the one we live in now."

The Bad Bears' house suffered damage during a wind storm earlier this year and much of the siding on the garage is gone. The inside of the house is also in need of maintenance: a crack in the wall lets in a cold winter draft, the floor is warped, the cupboards and shelves are falling apart and many of the doors are without doorknobs.

Black Eagle says the reason the Bad Bears' home is in need of repair is not due to normal wear and tear or poor construction, but because so many people live there.

"The house is not able to withstand all that use," he says. He adds that the maintenance department is so overwhelmed by emergency work orders that getting to routine upkeep is rare.

Stewart, who processes the applications for HUD hous-

es, says complaints like these make many people cynical that they'll get help of any kind. Most don't renew their applications until a rumor circulates that HUD is going to give the tribe money for more houses, she says. Further, she says, many tribal members don't understand the basics of HUD housing.

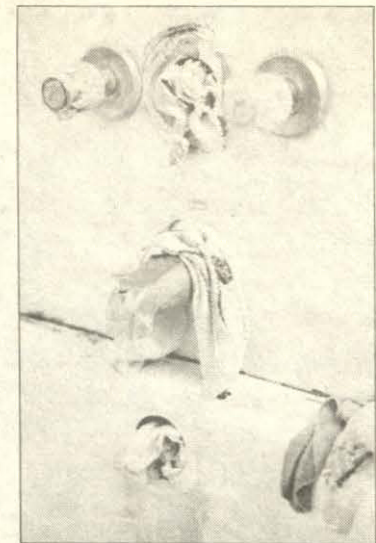
"Lots of people expect to just be given houses," she says.

Stewart pulls out an incomplete application from one tribal member. The applicant's message, scrawled across the bottom of the two-page application, reveals the reasoning behind not answering the 12 questions required to get consideration for a HUD house.

It reads, "I'll answer your stupid questions when you give me a house!"



Shirley Bad Bear holds her grandson Chester, while the rest of the 13-member household sleeps during her quiet time found in the early morning hours.



The bathtub fixtures are worn down by neglect and stress from up to 13 people turning them on and off daily. Diane Deputy and her husband, Chester, who is holding their son, watch with Tommy Bad Bear as Edwina Bad Bear bakes a chocolate cake before the kids return home from school.





The Big Man family's home has deteriorated to a point that it is beyond repair. Still, they are on a waiting list for housing.

The patchwork of linoleum and bare wood floor in the kitchen is only part of the Big Mans' worries. Underneath, the beams holding up the floor are deteriorating, one of several problems making the house unsafe.



The Big Mans' house sits next to a new home built by the federal government. The family has been trying to get a government-built home since the early 1970s.

THE WAITING GAME

Desperate for a new home, the Big Man family has applied for HUD homes for years. But when funds for new houses came, relatives of a Crow housing authority board member made the list instead.

When the Department of Housing and Urban Development gave the Crow Tribe money in 1991 for 24 badly needed houses, the tribal government held a meeting to select the lucky families to occupy the new homes.

The short waiting list for the St. Xavier district included the Big Man family, whose members were living in a tired old house next to the railroad tracks in Crow Agency.

Because their house was dilapidated, the housing authority had given the Big Man family "high need" status on the waiting list.

But when tribal government leaders dispersed from that October meeting, the Big Man family had not made the final cut.

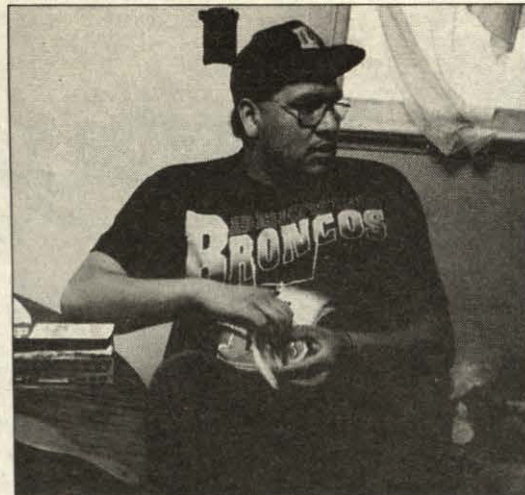
Instead, the son, stepson, brother-in-law and sister-in-law of the tribal representative from St. Xavier all made the list of soon-to-be homeowners.

"I know damn well people will say nepotism," St. Xavier housing board member Starr Not Afraid said recently. "So at the beginning, when we were selecting, I said, 'I don't want to vote. I want to draw myself out of the selection.'"

Whether Not Afraid did or didn't vote — the official minutes do not make it clear — many tribal members say that a position in Crow government is all it takes to get housing for family members.

"If we got in there, our family could be wealthy for a while," said Alden Big Man Jr., whose parents live in the run-down home whose ownership is shared with several families.

Inside the Big Man house, the younger Big Man speaks about his worries that rotting floorboards and a shifting roof mean his parents' house will someday be home to disaster. On several windows torn plastic covers the places where windowpanes once were. Broken electrical sockets are covered with black tape



Alden Big Man Jr. often spends the weekend at his parents' house in Crow Agency.

to keep the children safe. Under the mask of tape, a tangled mass of electrical wires pose a fire hazard.

The poor condition of the house is noted several times in the Big Mans' file at the housing authority.

The official file of Thomas Little Owl, a brother-in-law of housing authority member Starr Not Afraid, shows that he already owns his own home. Nonetheless, the Little Owl family was selected for a new HUD house.

The names of those who are waiting for a home are on a list taped to the wall in the housing authority reception room. Under the name Big Man are several years of application dates, representing repeated requests for consideration.

"They are really good about coming in and applying," said one authority staffer.

The name of Myron Driftwood, Not Afraid's stepson, appeared only twice on that waiting list, the first time in 1987. After making its second application in 1991, not long after word got out that new housing money was forthcoming, the Driftwood family was selected to get a new HUD home.

Why were these families chosen when the Big Man family's need was so thoroughly and repeatedly documented?

Deirdre Flood, an official in the Native American program in HUD's Denver office, said that HUD information on the selections was in a warehouse and it would be "a major hassle" to locate it. In any case, she said, the choices made by the Crow Tribe in 1991 were "local decisions."

Cedric Black Eagle, executive director of the Crow Housing Authority, promised a reporter that he would investigate why the Big Man family was not chosen for a new house, but after several weeks and repeated requests from the reporter, he failed to provide any information.

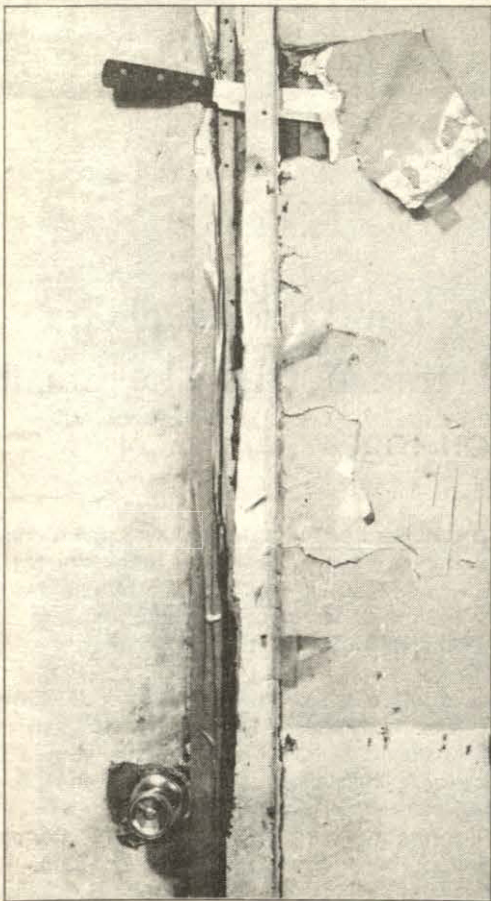
As for the Big Man family, they were notified late in 1994 that they will receive a house. However, it's a broken down Forest Service modular home — and they can take possession as soon as the housing authority repairs it. Six months from that notification they had yet to make a move.

Still, Not Afraid is unwavering in his contention that his family did not receive new HUD homes because of his position.

"I'm here to help my people, not to help myself or my family," Not Afraid said. "People say I didn't play by the rules. Those people are barking up the wrong tree."

**Written by
Tara Tuchscherer
Photographed by
Rebecca Huntington**

CROW RESERVATION



Signs of over-crowding and lack of basic maintenance permeate the Big Man household.



Lois Jefferson tried to rent a HUD house that a woman left vacant, but she was turned down by the owner. A year later the house is vacant and trashed.

WHEN HOME IS A SHELTER

Lois Jefferson moved to Billings in hope of bettering life for herself and her daughter. But now they share a room in a shelter because Jefferson says discrimination and her small income have kept her from renting affordable housing.

The Montana Rescue Mission Women and Family Shelter, which 46-year-old Lois Jefferson and her 14-year-old daughter, Lucille, have called home since November, is in a place that comes as close as Montana gets to urban squalor.

Next door to this shelter in downtown Billings, the dingy Greyhound bus depot funnels travelers both home and away. A strip of old, not-yet-abandoned hotels that rent rooms by the week lay claim to the next block. A room in the Yellowstone Hotel, for some, is a step up from living in one of the city's two shelters. Around the corner, porn magazines line the shelves of an adult bookstore.

But look beyond the bricks and mortar and you can peer into the lives of people here. Broken wine bottles. A filthy, tattered mattress in a basement stairwell, a bed for a boy all last summer. A scratched, gold-colored, two-month Alcoholics Anonymous coin discarded in the gray gravel of an alley. All are in the shadows of the towering Sheraton and Radisson hotels.

Lois and Lucille Jefferson never planned to move to the shelter from their native Crow Indian Reservation to the south, and they don't plan to stay at the shelter any longer than they must. But for now, it's their best housing option, albeit an unexpected one.

For 14 years, Jefferson was a radio dispatcher for the Crow Agency police

department, but lost her job after the Bureau of Indian Affairs was given control of the police station. She worked as a Forest Service park ranger for two years and as a forest firefighter for seven. After she developed a hernia, Jefferson's doctor told her to find a desk job. He suggested she go back to school. She did, enrolling in May Technical College's medical secretary program.

This meant a move to Billings from Jefferson's mother's house on the Crow Reservation, about 60 miles away. Once in Billings, Jefferson searched two weeks for an apartment while living with her brother. But the odds were against her before she even picked up the Billings classifieds. Lois Jefferson is an underdog: she has only a small income and she is Indian.

She says some landlords don't like renting to Native Americans. Most don't say this bluntly, Jefferson acknowledges, but the message is plain enough.

When inquiring about rentals over the phone, she says, she is usually encouraged to come and take a look. But when she meets the landlord, she often sees a sudden transformation. When you've seen that look in people's faces, it tells what words don't say. She remembers one landlord in particular: "When he looked at me and I was Indian, I could see he didn't want me to live there," she says.

But like so many other Native Americans in the state, Jefferson never

**Written by Dustin Solberg
Photographed by Jeff Powers**



Lois Jefferson and her daughter Lucille share a tiny room at the Billings homeless shelter. They say housing discrimination forced them to seek refuge here.



Jefferson spends her days taking classes at May Technical College, learning skills necessary to better her future.



Lucille Jefferson makes the best of her spring break, playing outside the shelter.

reported what she knew in her gut was discrimination.

Linda Henry, the fair housing coordinator in Billings, says Jefferson is typical. She suspects few Indians ever report such encounters.

Henry studies housing discrimination complaints like these for the Billings Council for Concerned Citizens (CCC), a group funded by the federal government's Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

From her desk in the corner of CCC's one-room downtown Billings office, Henry explains that 30 percent of discrimination cases investigated nationwide reveal discriminatory practices by landlords.

In Billings, she says, the record is more dismal.

A full 64 percent of housing discrimination cases investigated in Billings expose discrimination by landlords, she says. And this percentage, she notes, can only include the discrimination cases reported to her office. People like Jefferson go uncounted.

As a full-time student and single mother, Jefferson had a hard time finding an apartment she could afford. Her monthly income of \$475 comes from \$332 in Aid to Families with Dependent Children and \$143 in food stamps. Rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Billings is about \$375 to \$500.

In her search for housing, Jefferson met refusal after refusal. Once she found a one-bedroom apartment she could afford, but the landlord would only rent it to one person, and not to a mother and daughter.

For Jefferson, who has a responsible work record and a kind, amiable manner, such rejection was hard to take.

"Sometimes it really gets to me and it gets frustrating," she says.

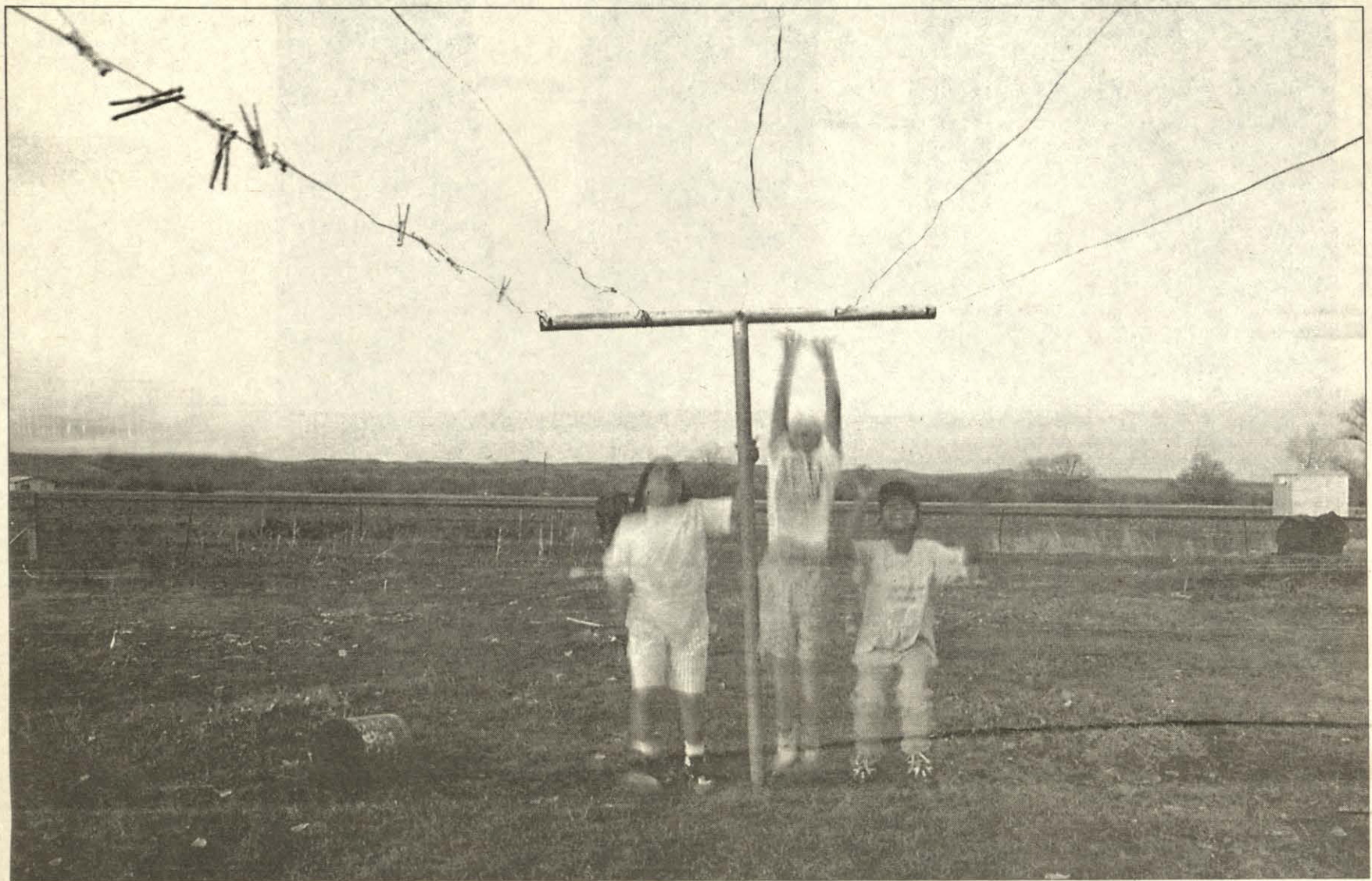
So after two weeks, Jefferson left her brother's house and moved into the shelter. She says she didn't want to burden her brother any longer.

The shelter was once the Hotel Lincoln. Brass plates still display the names of rooms, names with a western flavor, like "The Dude Ranch" and "Elkhorn Saloon." Attractive new green and tan carpet covers the hallway floors. Loudspeakers on all three floors crackle when announcements about visitors or phone calls cut the quiet.

Jefferson's friend LaVera Unger lives in the shelter and runs the library there. It's stocked with jigsaw puzzles, bean bag chairs, and donated books, most exhorting Christianity. Several copies of the New Testament bear the words "Are you sure you will go to Heaven?"

For most shelter residents, the maximum stay is 30 days. But residents can stay longer if they join the shelter's "life enrichment" classes and meet other requirements.

A full 64 percent housing discrimination cases investigated in Billings expose discrimination by landlords.

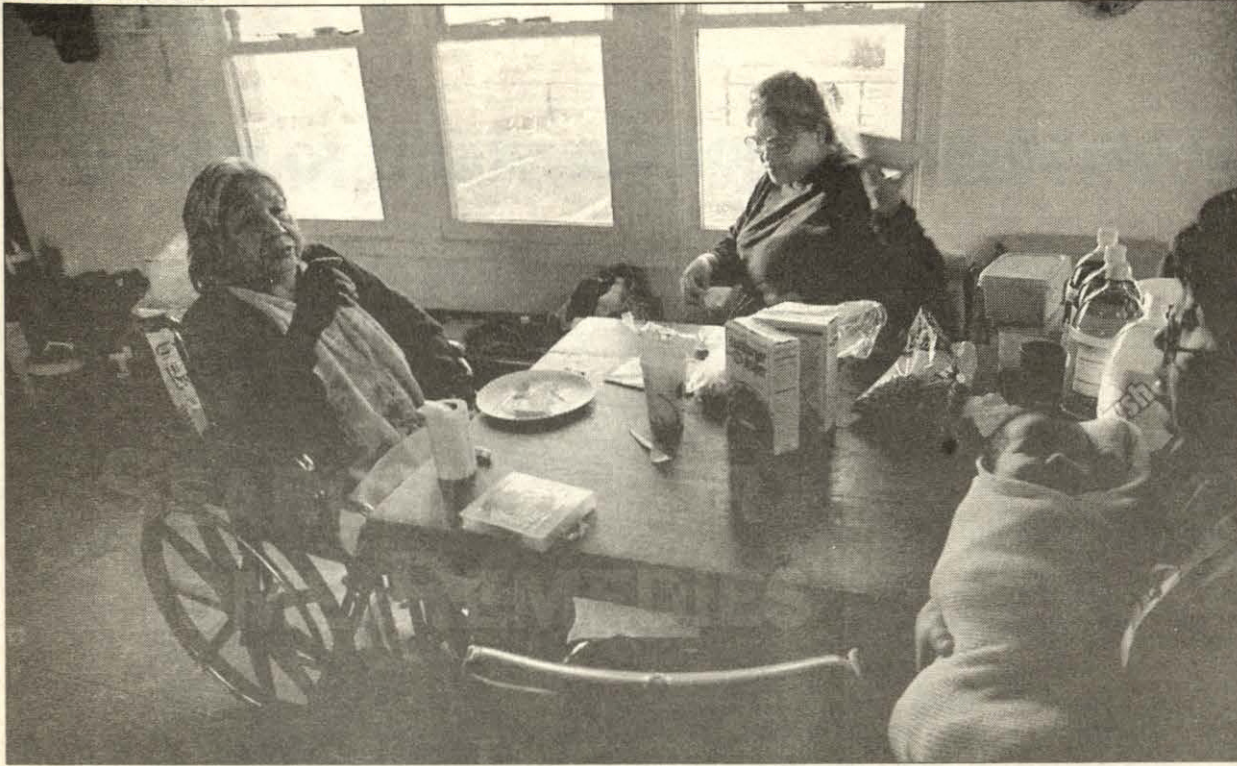


Lois and Lucille Jefferson's relatives enjoy the rural life, something not found in the confines of the Women and Family Shelter in Billings.



After school, kids living at the shelter spend time "hanging out" on the streets, playing or antagonizing each other.

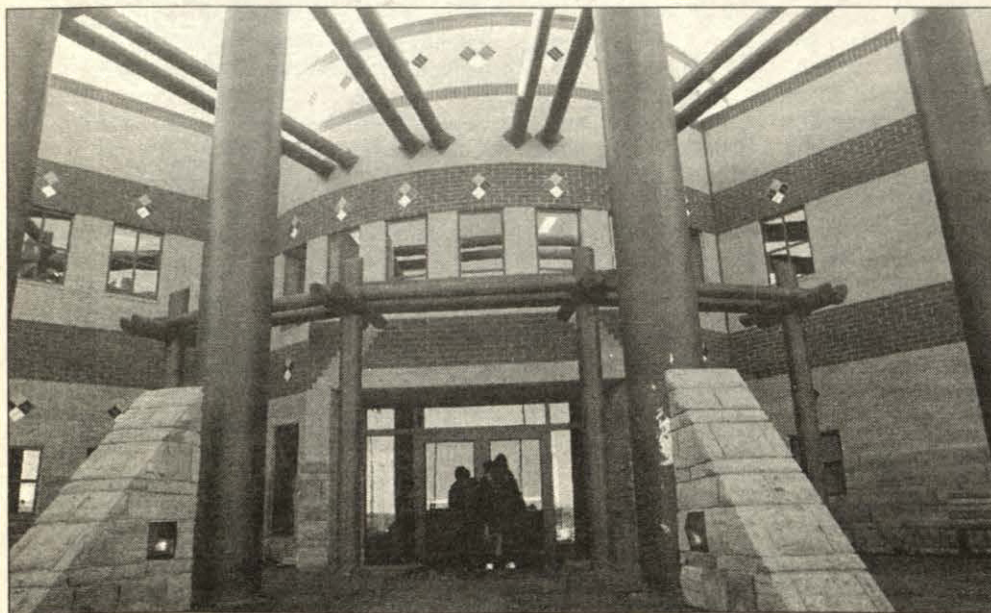
Next door to this shelter in downtown Billings, the Greyhound bus depot funnels travelers to their destinations. A strip of old, not-yet-abandoned hotels that rent rooms by the week lays claim to the next block. A room in the Yellowstone Hotel, for some, is a step up from living in one of the city's two shelters.



Jefferson has been back to the Crow Reservation only three times since she moved to Billings. Since moving to the shelter she has lost touch with her family and their way of life.



Years of frustration of not getting housing on the reservation has made Lois Jefferson stop renewing her application for housing. Jefferson says reservation politics determines where your name ends up on the tribal council's waiting list.



After graduation from May Technical College, Lois Jefferson hopes to land a job at the Indian Health Service in the new hospital on the Crow Reservation.

Housing is in such short supply on the Crow Reservation that 10 people were sharing her mother's three-bedroom home when Jefferson and Lucille lived there before their move to Billings. The family calls her mother's house the rescue mission because so many live there, or have lived there.

All residents have responsibilities here. They do daily chores in exchange for room and board. All must attend evening chapel.

Both Jefferson and Lucille also assume responsibilities as full-time students. Lucille will soon begin high school and a college-prep curriculum. Jefferson is financing her way through May's medical secretary curriculum using student loans.

Nellie Scott, a teacher at the technical school, admires Jefferson's spunk. "I was kind of appalled when Lois said they were living in the shelter," says Scott. "But she's made it work. She's old enough to have the work ethic that some of our younger students don't have."

Her computer teacher, Sid Harder, agrees.

"She's very motivated," he says. "You can tell she wants to be here and wants to learn."

Jefferson's goal is a job at the new Indian Health Service hospital on the Crow Reservation. But though she plans to leave the shelter, she won't leave Billings after graduation.

Housing is in such short supply on the Crow Reservation that 10 people were sharing her mother's three-bedroom home when Jefferson and Lucille lived there before their move to Billings. The family calls her mother's house the rescue mission because so many live there, or have lived there. Jefferson says she'll carpool to the reservation hospital from Billings if she gets a medical secretary job.

Since she is a single mother living in a homeless shelter, she may get help with housing from the Billings Housing Authority, a HUD agency.

Lucy Brown, the authority's executive director, says families like Jefferson's are not unusual. There are 1,071 names on the waiting list for the city's 2,200 public housing units. In one way Jefferson and Lucille are lucky. Since they live in a homeless shelter, they'll be put on a "preference" list. That means a wait of 18 months or so, instead of as much as several years.

"If they're not preferenced, we may never serve them," Brown said.

This doesn't bode well for much of the city's Native American population. Native Americans comprise about 3 percent of this city of 113,000 residents, but are 25 percent of the Housing Authority's clients.

Likewise, at the Montana Rescue Mission, director Gary Drake says Native Americans comprise about 25 percent of residents at its two Billings shelters. In addition to the Women and Family Shelter, there's also the original Montana Rescue Mission, which serves only men.

So, unlike many other Native Americans, Lois Jefferson has hope of a future that is promising. A future that is secure. She knows that staying in Billings will mean putting further distance from herself and her traditions. She won't take part as often in the sweat lodge ceremonies she cherishes. She won't speak her native Crow as often. She won't see her family as much as she would like.

But Lois and Lucille Jefferson will have a home.

DISCRIMINATION OFTEN NOT REPORTED, HARD TO PROVE

One Billings landlord is reluctant to rent to Native Americans. He says bad tenant experience forced him to change his rental requirements, but maintains his policy isn't discriminatory.

Written by Dustin Solberg

Jim Eshleman doesn't like renting to Native Americans.

Eshleman says he knows not all Native American tenants are alike, that the few who are irresponsible ruin it for the others. Despite this, he says he'd rather not rent to Indians.

Eshleman got into the rental property business in Billings, Montana's largest city, in 1986, and at one time owned three rental units. It's not as lucrative a business as he once thought, he says. He learned this lesson in 1989 when the bank foreclosed on the one-bedroom house he owned on Billings' south side, a part of town with a large population of Native Americans and Hispanics. Eshleman has been "burned" three times, he says, twice by Native Americans.

He rented his southside house to a Native American couple before he'd been in the business long. He had no preconceived ideas about renting to Native Americans then, he says.

"I went in so trusting. I went in naive," he says. But now, "I don't trust anybody."

Late in 1988, the couple in that house quit paying rent. At one time, he says, 15 people lived in the single-bedroom home. Eshleman says he tried to evict them, turning off the gas and electricity, but soon learned Montana law forbids landlords from shutting off utilities as a way to evict tenants. He turned the gas and electricity back on, as the law requires, and waited for spring.

Eshleman says the state doesn't allow a landlord to evict tenants in winter, which is why he tried to nudge them out instead. But Eshleman is wrong.

"I almost find that amusing. There is no such law," says Klaus Sitte, deputy director of Montana Legal Services and author of a book on Montana tenant and landlord relations. He says that Montana's Landlord-Tenant Act does indeed forbid shutting off utilities to evict a tenant, but doesn't keep a landlord from evicting tenants in the winter.

Sitte says Eshleman should have instead gotten a court order to evict the tenants.

"Montana law is crystal clear on this," he says. "It does not permit a tenant to reside in a place if they do not pay rent."

He says the Landlord Tenant Act is about 20 pages long and a necessity for landlords.

"Any landlord worth their salt needs to read it," he says.

The delinquent tenants remained in Eshleman's house through the winter. Without rent money, Eshleman says he couldn't afford the home's mortgage payments. In March 1989, the bank took back the house.

It's hard to say if Eshleman will ever forget it was Indians who quit paying rent. He's had six years, but his words tell a frustrating story that is still vivid in his mind.

His creditors will forget that he quit making payments on the house next year when his credit record comes clean, seven years after the foreclosure. The interest rate on one of his credit cards rose and he's been questioned more closely when he's asked the bank for loans, though he says he's never been denied one.

Since he lost his rental house, Eshleman says he's changed the way he rents his property. He now requires references, a damage deposit, the first and last month's rent, and a signed lease. A

Billings landlord group recommended these changes, and gave him samples of lease agreements he could use, he says.

These stipulations, Eshleman acknowledges, end up keeping most Native Americans out of his rentals. But he says it's not discrimination.

"It's not that I'm discriminating. It's that the process weeds them out," he says. "Yeah, a minority group like Native Americans is probably going to have a harder time. Especially if they've just come off the reservation. They don't have any references."

"To certain groups, maybe that's discriminatory."

As long as he follows the standards he's laid down, and doesn't change them, Eshleman feels he's safe from charges of discrimination.

Montana law forbids discrimination in housing based on race, color, sex, age, familial status, marital status, religion, creed, national origin, or disability.

If a Native American couple is first on Eshleman's waiting list and has the necessary rent and deposit, but no references, he says he'll rent his property to someone who meets all his requirements instead. In some cases, this could mean renting to a white couple who was second on the list.

"Now did I just discriminate? In some eyes, maybe I did," he says. "I went with my policy."

"If I treat everybody by the same rules, they can't come after me. You can't make an exception. That's when they'll try to hang you."

But Ric Moser of the Montana Human Rights Commission says his agency can indeed go after a landlord with such practices.

It's within a landlord's rights to set high standards, he says. "But those standards cannot be specifically designed to keep out Native Americans. If in fact he has those criteria to keep Native Americans out, that would be a violation in and of itself."

"It's not the easiest thing in the world to prove, but it can be done. Sooner or later somebody's going to come forward, and when they do we're going to nail them. We'll go after them tooth and nail."

Before a discrimination case can be investigated, it must be reported, Moser says. He knows Native Americans don't report all housing discrimination.

"It's not the Native American cultural style to be confrontational," he says.

Allegations of housing discrimination in Montana are investigated by the Montana Human Rights Commission. If no agreement is reached in discussions and arbitration, the case may go to court.

Moser says he isn't surprised that the rental house Eshleman lost was on Billings' south side, where minorities, the "most vulnerable part of society," live.

"The vast majority of our housing complaints comes from low income areas," he says. "Most discrimination is about power. Landlords can make a

power assertion without much threat of being challenged."

The human rights commission doesn't take complaints lightly, but all complaints need substantiation, Moser says.

"They can't just say, 'I applied to rent this place and he didn't rent to me.' It must be discrimination," he says.

Other applicants could be better qualified, or a landlord could have rented to someone he knew, he says.

Moser says the vast majority of landlords adhere to the state's discrimination laws. But there's a

“The last thing in the world I would want to be in Montana is a single Native American woman with children finding a place to rent. There is no other scenario that has a worse time finding a place to live.

— Ric Moser

Montana Human Rights Commission

"minority of landlords who rent in the lower income area who are never going to change unless they're beaten over the head. A redneck is a redneck is a redneck. If they're not going to change we at least want them out" of the housing business.

Finding a home to rent isn't easy for any group, Moser says, whether "you're a nice WASPish couple with nice kids" or Native American. But it's more difficult for Native Americans, he says.

"The last thing in the world I would want to be in Montana is a single Native American woman with children finding a place to rent. There is no other scenario that has a worse time finding a place to live," he says.

Linda Henry of the Billings Council for Concerned Citizens, a fair housing group, says that 64 percent of housing discrimination cases investigated in Billings expose discrimination by landlords.

She outlines three forms of housing discrimination: overt, disparate treatment, and adverse impact.

When a landlord refuses to rent to people with kids, Henry says that's overt discrimination. When a landlord requests a higher damage deposit from Native Americans, Henry calls that disparate treatment.

Policies like Eshleman's could lead to adverse impact discrimination when they "effectively eliminate entire groups of people," she says. When this happens, she says complaints can be filed with the Montana Human Rights Commission.

As for Eshleman, he's not so excited about the rental business anymore. He says he once spent an entire weekend cleaning an apartment a Native American woman lived in even before beginning to make the necessary repairs.

He's now trying to sell his second house, which he rents for \$250 a month. After the monthly mortgage payment, he clears only \$75.

"It's just too big of a pain," he says of the business. "I'm getting out of it."

ROAD TO ROCKY BOY'S RESERVATION ISOLATED



Some of the Indian Reservations within Montana are not near major cities nor major employers. Rocky Boy's, Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Reservations, all dot the Hi-Line that stretches across northern Montana. All suffer from high unemployment rates and all have critical housing needs.

ROCKY BOY'S

Population: 4,000

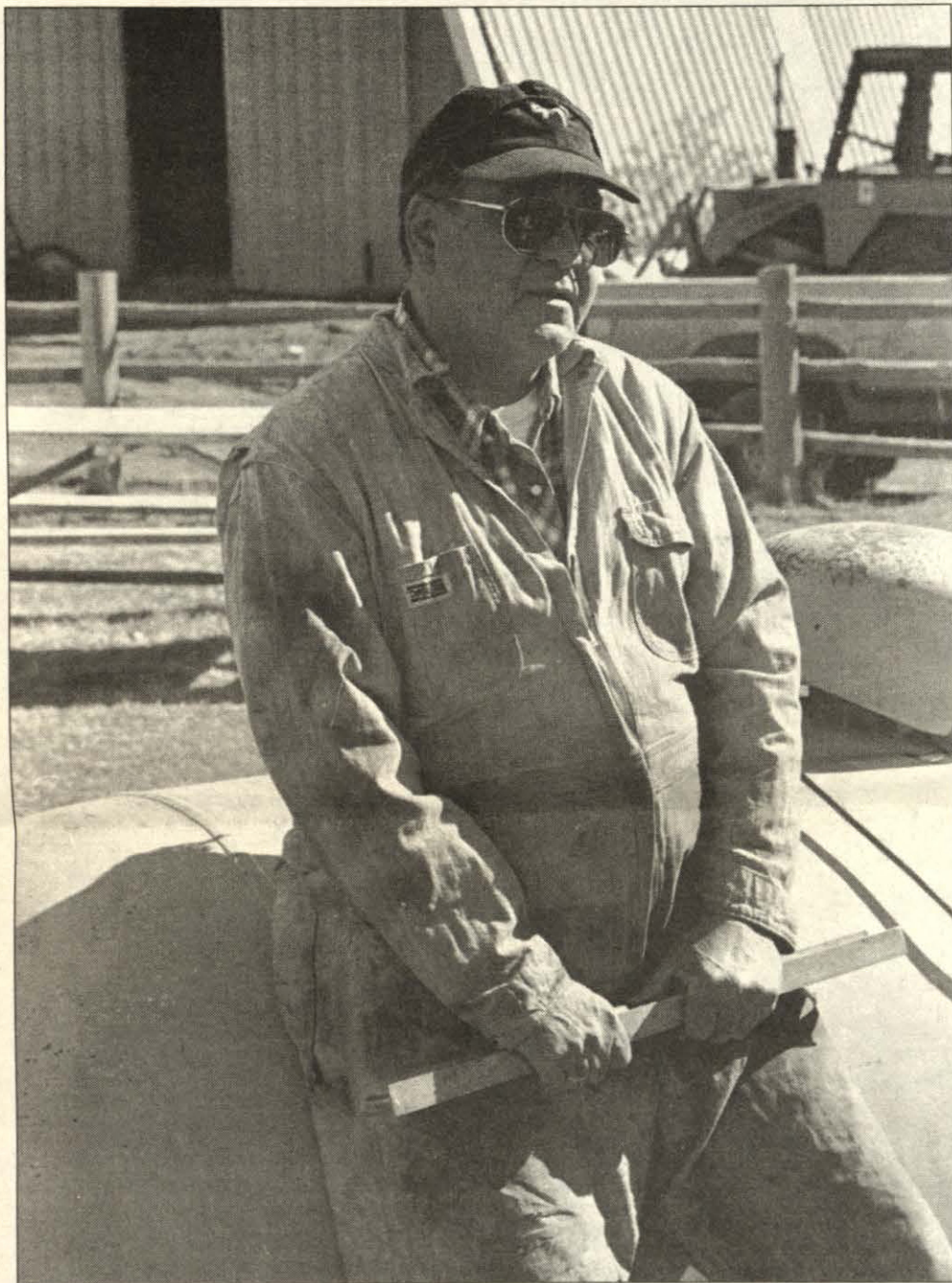
Money for housing: From November 1993 to April 1994, \$109,000

🏠 87 houses lack plumbing

🏠 98 houses without electricity

🏠 800 people on waiting lists with 280 who reapplied this year

🏠 4 houses being built this year



Alfred Parker occupies one of Rocky Boy's mutual help homes, which means he is responsible for its maintenance. The Comprehensive Grant Program helps him modernize the home.

Rocky Boy's FACELIFT HINGES ON FEDERAL FUNDS

**Written by Patricia Snyder
Photographed by Holly Tripp**

Alfred Parker leans against a 100-gallon propane tank, peering up at his new roof, paid for by the Comprehensive Grant Program on the Rocky Boy's Reservation.

"I'm grateful for what housing has done for me," says Parker, a robust, plain-talking member of the Chippewa-Cree tribe. The new roof came just in time — the covering on his 24-year-old home wasn't leaking yet, but he says he knew it could start any time.

The Comprehensive Grant Program, a five-year federal allotment with a \$1.1 million annual budget for this northcentral Montana reservation, is paying to upgrade 343 of its 487 Housing and Urban Development homes.

While thousands of American Indians living on Montana's seven reservations wait to get into government-subsidized homes, for the thousands more who have one, the cost of upkeep beyond day-to-day repair is often well beyond their means. At Rocky Boy's, where the average annual income is \$15,000, programs like this keep the homes from eroding into eyesores.

Repairing homes is easier than replacing them, says Merle Belcourt, director of the Comprehensive Grant Program. "We would kind of like to see them getting a title for something other than a structure that is ready to fall down," he says. With repairs, most of the homes can last another 15 or 20 years, he adds.

For Parker, comp grant funds purchased a new stove and refrigerator and paid for new siding and doors. Federal money also paid to replace bathroom tile damaged by a plumbing leak.

"I was trying to get enough money to fix it myself, but I can't seem to get enough ahead," Parker says.

Parker lives in one of 283 mutual help homes on Rocky Boy's. HUD kicks in about \$1,000 a year for the annual house payments, but other than help in emergency situations, like an electrical hazard, there is no other regular subsidy for upkeep.

To qualify for a mutual help home, applicants must have enough secure income to keep the house in good shape. But once they qualify, homeowners like Parker sometimes find large projects difficult to afford. Parker says he tries to save some money each month — whatever he can spare.

"We really have to save our pennies and everything else," says Parker, who contracts to install septic tanks and water and sewer lines.

Some years ago, a profitable contract and a bargain on unfinished lumber helped him build his back deck. Today, that deck is weathered and grey, but the one-time upgrade provided by the comp grant program recently paid for a finished-wood deck on the front of his house.

The grant program is in its second year and already the face of Rocky Boy's housing is showing the effects. So far, 95 mutual help homes have been improved. An additional 175 mutual help homes and 73 low-rent homes are slated for repair.

"We want to respond to the mutual help first because it's one-shot," says Belcourt. Low-rent housing has an annual budget of nearly half-a-million dollars for administration, low-income utility reimbursement and maintenance. Belcourt says low-rent housing will be remodeled all at once in the program's fifth year.

However, proposed cuts to the HUD budget could reduce Belcourt's \$1.1 million annual comp grant budget, though this year's budget is secure. If cuts come in the future, some items will have to be axed from a list that includes replacing roofs, windows, doors, damaged cabinets, furnaces or water heaters, or changing the worn, paint-chipped wood siding.

Before he applied for the program, Belcourt met with tenants to determine what each house needed. Requests for items like microwaves and televisions were tossed out, he says. Wall-to-wall carpeting was high on many lists, but many people also have basic needs, such as tile.

However, if cuts do come in other years, Belcourt says he'll meet with tenants to cross off items to adjust to his leaner budget.

"Maybe I'm not going to give them new cabinets," he says. "I guess we're not going to be able to get everything we want."



Merle Belcourt, program director

FORT BELKNAP

Someplace
to call **Home**

Hauling water is a weekly routine of many residents of the Fort Belknap Reservation because they think the water that comes from their taps is not drinkable. When Jackie Hawley's mother and grandparents' supply of fresh water is gone, she makes the 20-mile roundtrip to Snake Butte, one of a few natural springs located on the reservation.



TAINTED WATERS RUN DEEP

At Fort Belknap the water has iron in it, which causes red stains.

It has manganese in it, which looks black.

It has hydrogen sulfide in it, which can give it a rotten-egg smell when run through a hot water heater.

Written by Patricia Snyder
Photographed by Terri Long Fox

The iron in the water might stain white clothes when they're washed, and manganese might turn potatoes black when they're boiled. People might even have a film on their coffee and tea.

Perched on a hill above the Fort Belknap Reservation offices, a few miles from Harlem, is a weather-beaten, 25-year-old water storage tank that an Indian Health Service official has compared to a rusty tin can.

Designed to store water for 300 homes, it presently serves 383. It has a history of leaking and officials say it needs to be replaced. Now.

"That tank up on the hill is probably not much sturdier than an empty beer can," says John Hawley, a member of the reservation's tribal housing authority board. "It could go at any time."

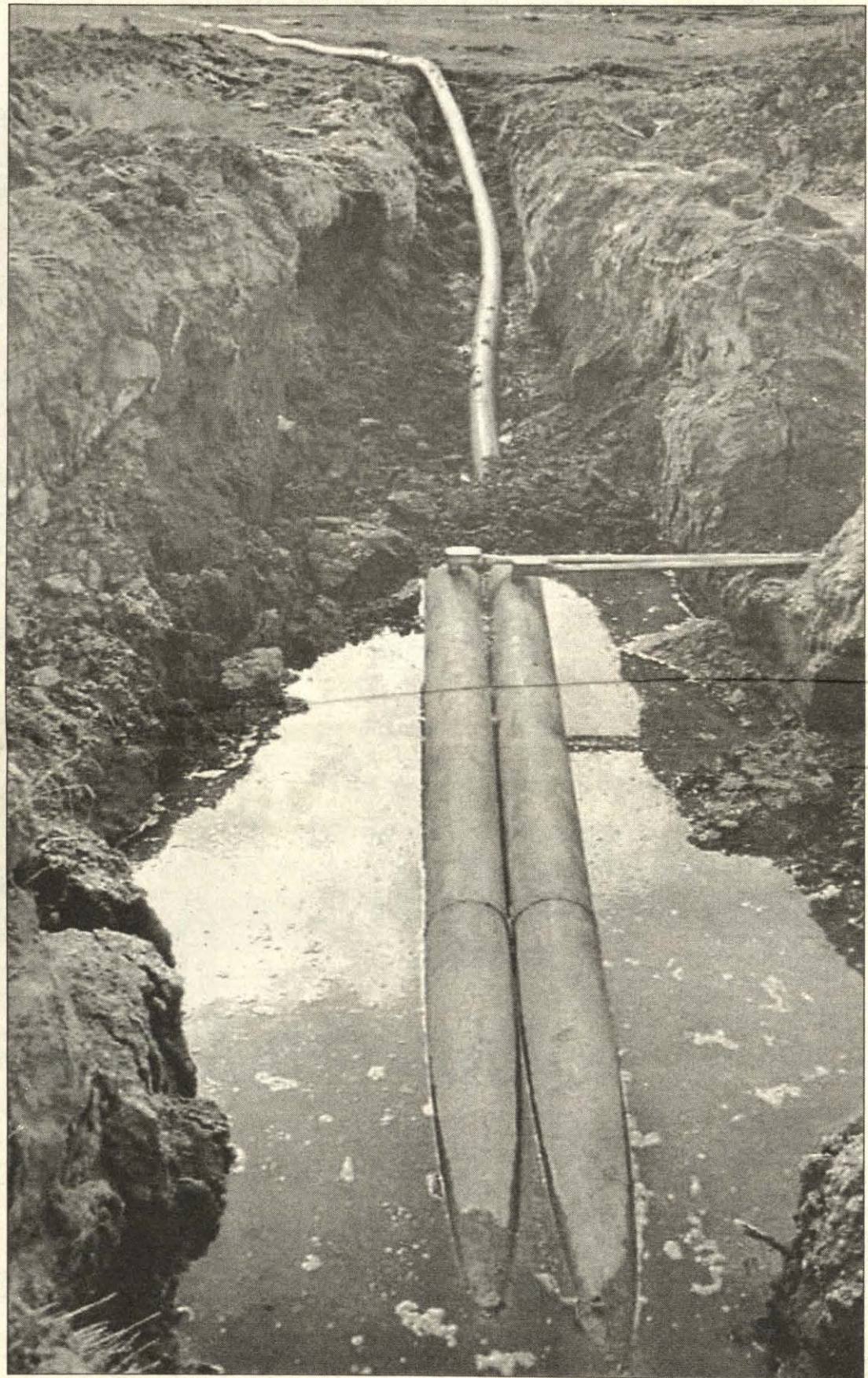
The storage tank is just one of several water-related problems that Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Indians face daily on this 700,000-acre reservation in northcentral Montana.

Tribal officials are hopeful that federal money may solve the water storage tank problem. Bill Stiffarm, a construction representative with Indian Health Service, says that last year's Congress approved his request for almost \$1.2 million to build a new tank and connect it to the water system. The present Congress must appropriate the funding.

Meanwhile, other problems with the reservation's water also need to be patched and the solutions don't seem to be as imminent.

For example, the agency water system — one of five on the reservation — is over-burdened and under-serviced, Stiffarm says. Only two people are employed to maintain the 19 miles of waterline and 238 hydrants, and Stiffarm says that is just not enough.

The worker shortage means that sediment, which should be regularly flushed through individual hydrants, accumulates in the bottom of the water pipes and slows the water flow. Some residents complain about the grit that makes its way through the pipes and into their taps.



These pipes are part of the new system put in service when the water treatment plant at Fort Belknap Agency failed. The new system should help get the plant get on-line fast after a failure. When the plant fails, approximately 300 homes are left with only a 1 1/2-day supply of water. Residents of the Fort Belknap Agency either have a Culligan water system in their homes or haul their water from Snake Butte. Wells on the reservation often do not produce a drinkable water supply. Residents use it for cooking and cleaning but not drinking, because some say it tastes bad and others fear it is harmful.

FORT BELKNAP

Gone says she has to skim scum from the surface of her tap water after she boils it. Grey water flows into her bathtub, and in the summer when the agency's water tank runs low, the water that spurts from her faucets looks muddy.

But many more reservation residents complain about the color and smell of the water that runs through those pipes and out of their taps at home.

Although Stiffarm says the water is fine, is tested regularly and is of better quality than it was just a couple of years ago, those served by the system are concerned.

Rowena Gone, for example, is afraid her water isn't healthy.

"I feel like I can't drink it," she says. "It tastes too hard, like it's got a lot of minerals in it."

Rather than drink water from the agency's system, she makes two 20-mile trips each week to a natural spring near Snake Butte.

Gone says she has to skim scum from the surface of her tap water after she boils it. Grey water flows into her bathtub, and in the summer when the agency's water tank runs low, the water that spurts from her faucets looks muddy.

Although Stiffarm vouches for the quality of the water, he acknowledges that it might not be pleasant. He says the water does have iron in it, which causes red stains, and it does have manganese in it, which looks black, and it does have hydrogen sulfide in it, which can give it a rotten egg smell when run through a hot water heater.

The iron in the water might stain white clothes when they're washed, he says, and manganese might turn potatoes black when they're boiled. People might even have a film on their coffee and tea.

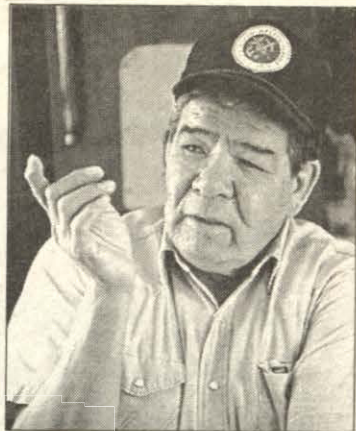
Several people not on the water system say water from individual wells not only tastes bad but stains their sinks and corrodes their pipes.

Board member Hawley hauls his drinking water from a neighbor's well, but is fully aware of the problem his own well water is causing in his home.

"I figure I'll have to replace my hot water heater any time now," he says.

Susie Hay, Comprehensive Grant Program coordinator on the reservation, says that people don't realize what water can do to their house. Her program is requesting about \$160,000 from HUD for next year to fix plumbing and wells damaged by minerals.

Some Fort Belknap residents have built homes at sites where there are water problems, even though they knew of the trouble before they began to build. Hay says in some



Bill Stiffarm

Indian Health Service employee Bill Stiffarm looks over the Fort Belknap Agency. He is responsible for maintaining health standards for the water system at Fort Belknap.



cases people want a site because they have leased the property for 10 years or longer with the anticipation of finally being awarded a government-built house. Some tribal members want to build on a piece of land given to them by other family members.

The majority of the reservation, however, is simply not well-suited for homes sites.

Stiffarm says that out on the treeless, rolling plain, much of the water is anywhere from 200 to 400 feet below the surface, while the standard minimum for good water in the area is 100 feet below the surface.

But, as with other water problems facing the reservation, authorities say that is just something these Indian people have to contend with in a place that, in 1888, the federal government decreed would be their home.

WALKING IN SMOOTH-SOLED SHOES



Like many reservation youths, Hadley Big Back and his mother lived with relatives while waiting for a home.

A stable life eludes many Northern Cheyenne youths. They are shuttled from one home to another while their families await a place to call their own. For Hadley Big Back, a life on the road is appealing.

Written by Thomas Nybo
Photographed by John Youngbear

At a quarter to midnight, Hadley Big Back shuffles his size-12 Air Jordans into his uncle's house and plunks down on the couch, adjusting the worn

brown cushions that will serve as his bed for the night.

The 16-year-old typifies a new form of homelessness — young American Indians growing up without a permanent residence. Because of a burgeoning population and a housing shortage on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, kids like Hadley often find themselves moving from home to home, living for brief stints with relatives and friends.

With an unemployment rate of more than 90 percent on the reservation, and 800 people on the waiting lists for federal housing, the prospect of home ownership for most Northern Cheyenne is grim. To survive, generations of families wind up sharing single houses, with as many as seven people living in a single bedroom.

An environment is created, Hadley says, where frustrated young people lose all ambition and turn increasingly to drugs and violence for escape.

But there are complicating factors, says Arlene Rogers, a social worker at Northern Cheyenne Social Services. Sure, many of these kids lack stable housing situations, she says, but many also lack jobs, parental supervision and educational opportunities. The high school dropout rate is high and the courts have been lax when it comes to enforcing truancy laws.

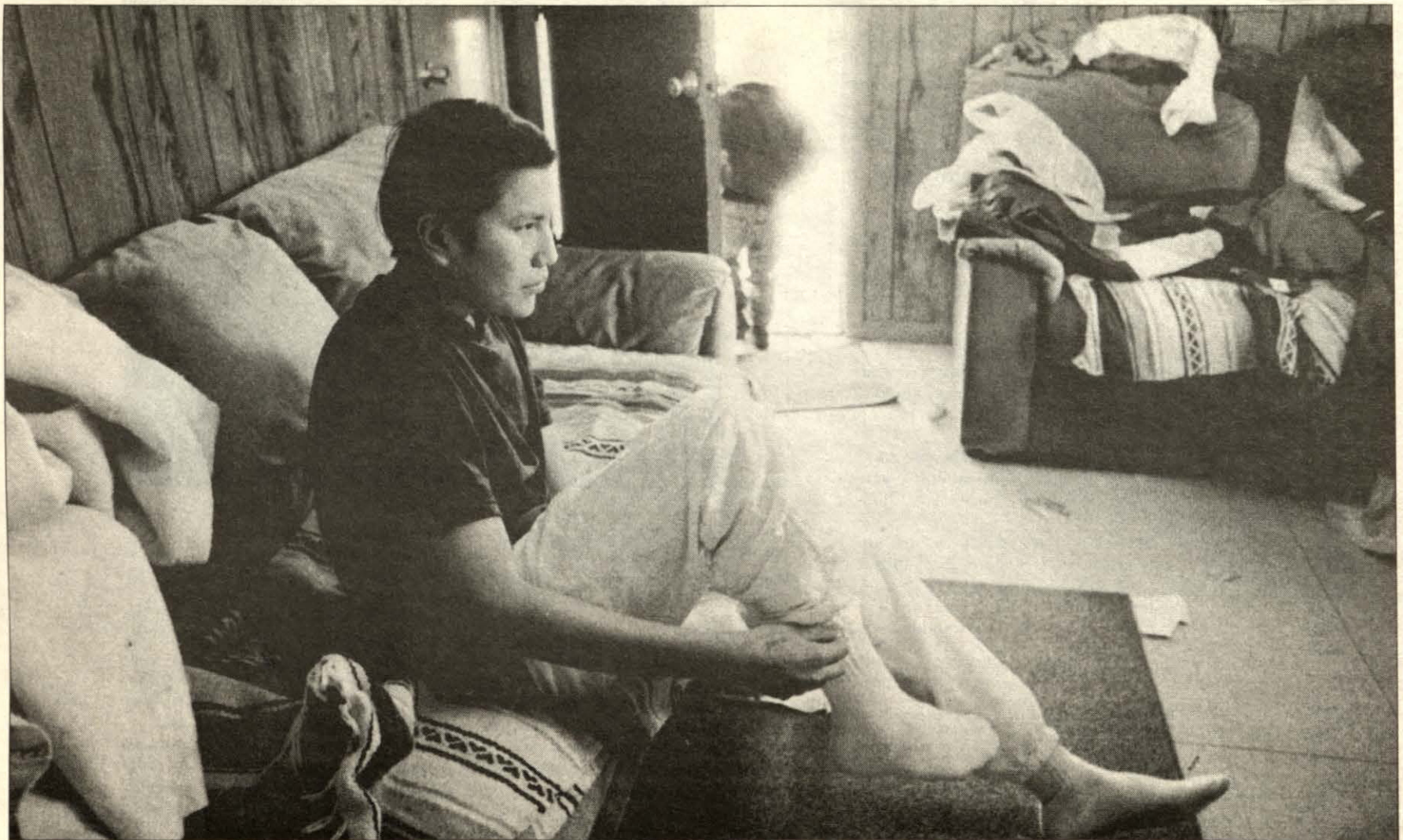
Regardless, one thing is certain: kids want change or escape. For Hadley, that escape has come in the form of marijuana, alcohol, cocaine and a host of other drugs.

"I've tried everything but heroin," he says. "I'm scared of needles, so I haven't tried it."

His face impassive and innocent, his voice soft and even, Hadley talks of his 15-year-old cousin Danny, who lived just down the street until he was brutally murdered this past February.

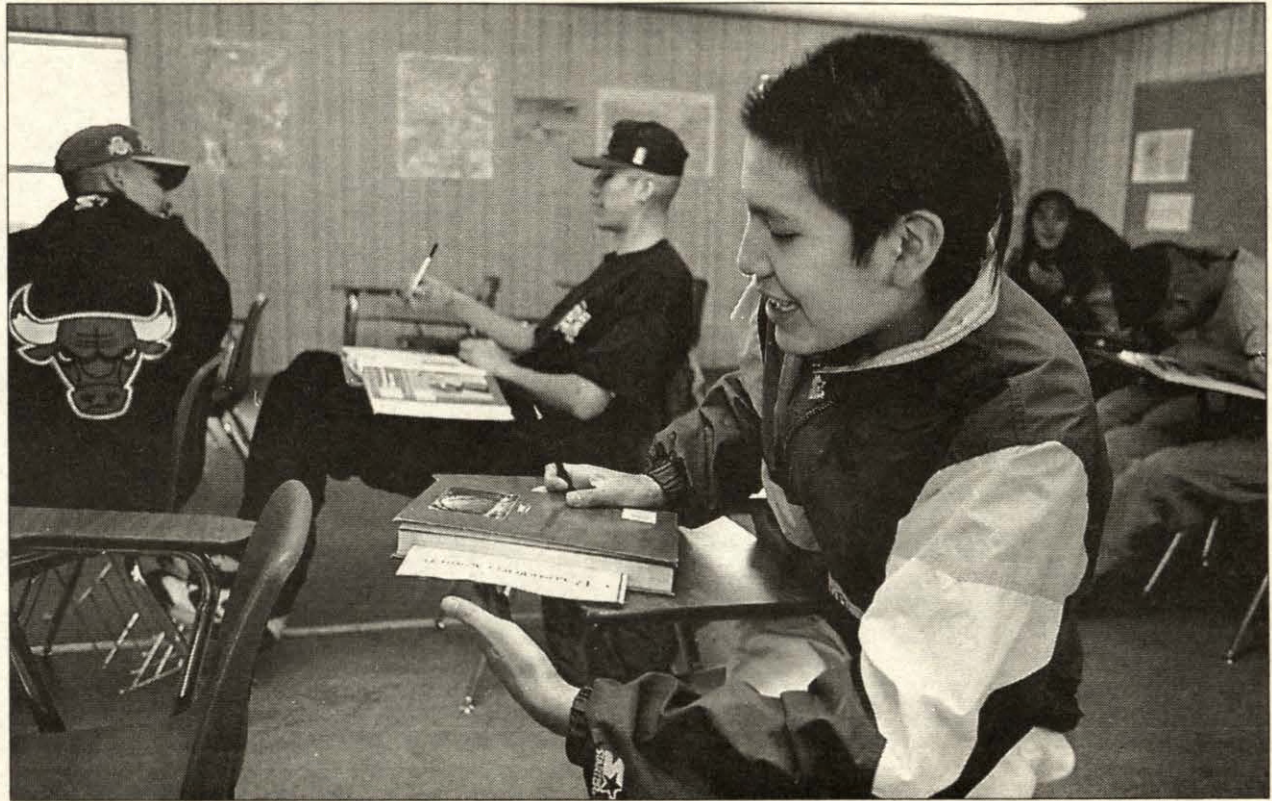
"He got stabbed 89 times," Hadley says, adding that one of the youths suspected of Danny's murder committed suicide when brought in for questioning by police.

During the past few years, Hadley says, life has become more dangerous on the reservation. With firearms and knives readily available, the classic notion of a neighborhood bully has taken on dangerous dimensions.



Hadley gets ready for school. He sleeps on the couch in the living room at his uncle's house.

Big Back just started school again after a stay in a drug and alcohol treatment center. At Lame Deer High School, one of his classes is parenting.



"It's not just a bruised cheek or a black eye you have to worry about, it's life or death," Hadley says, recalling an incident a few months ago when a Northern Cheyenne youth pulled a loaded gun on Hadley and aimed it at his face.

Many of the kids his age carry guns, Hadley says. "That's why I'm pretty mellow — I don't want to get shot."

Down the hall from where Hadley sits, his mother is asleep in a bedroom she shares with three of her children. Farrell Evans has a recurring dream in which her six children all have their own bedrooms, complete with posters on the walls. It's a simple dream, but one that might never be realized, she says.

She's been on the waiting list for a home for seven months, and lately she's reluctant to check her status with the Housing Authority.

"I hate calling them because it's discouraging," Evans says. "I already know the answer — there's nothing available. It's depressing."

When Hadley talks of dreams, he talks of leaving the reservation and getting a home away from the drugs and violence that have crept into reservation life, although Hadley admits he's become part of the problem.

"Most kids don't ever leave their parents," he says. "But I want to have a job and my own place. I want to get off the reservation."

Examining Hadley's body, it's easy to understand his aversion to reservation life. His many scars read like a road map from hell. On his forehead is a tiny divot where he was shot with a BB gun. If his head were shaved, he says, you could see the scars from the time his head smashed through a window. When he pulls up the legs on his pants, the skin on his shins is criss-crossed with tiny scars. And a festering scab the size of his thumb stands out on his thigh.

"My legs have been through torture," Hadley says, explaining that the scars came from running through barbed wire while being chased by police when he and some friends were out drinking. The scab formed after Hadley climbed through a window in an abandoned house and ripped his thigh on the metal frame, he says.

Lately, Hadley's living situation has become both simpler and more complex. Since returning from a drug and alcohol treatment center in late January, Hadley is living with his mother after a long absence, which adds a little stability to his life. But the conditions are far from ideal.

"Every time we take a shower we get shocked," Hadley's mother says of the faulty wiring in her brother's house. "That was the first thing Hadley found out when he jumped in the shower."

And because of the widespread use of drugs on the reservation — and because he used to deal them — Hadley often gets kids coming to him looking to score, even at his uncle's house.

"I tell them I don't have any drugs, that I'm trying to quit," Hadley says. "And they just laugh at me."

Hadley's housing situation is typical, says Rick Robinson, the executive director for the Boys and Girls Club in Lame Deer.

"Kids here get lost in the shuffle," Robinson says of life on the reservation, citing examples of kids who bounce from relative to relative, going through adolescence with no guidance other than what they receive from peers.

Rogers agrees, adding that social services is receiving more and more calls involving abuse in the home.

"When I first started working here in '85, we were getting about 16 referrals a month," Rogers says. "A couple months ago, we were up to 30. Now, we're getting between 50 and 60. Most of these are cases of neglect, but about 25 percent are cases of physical and sexual abuse."

Outside in the parking lot of the Boys and Girls club, a battered Honda Accord drives by with two teenage boys in it. The driver has an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. On the back of the car is a bumper sticker reading, "SAVE THE PLANET, KILL YOURSELF."

It's midnight and Hadley is sitting at the kitchen table in his uncle's house, thinking of the future as he stares at his Air Jordans.

"I always dream of playing basketball," he says. "But I don't have the grades. I'm always ineligible, or I don't go to school — I'm not the type of person who can go sit in a desk all day."

Tomorrow is Hadley's first day back at school since last fall when he went into treatment. But he's having second thoughts.

"I wanted to get in school when I got back, but not now," he says.

He picks up his left foot and runs his right hand along the sole of the sneaker, worn smooth after miles and miles of walking. He can't stay here for long — not on the couch, not in this house, not in this town.

"I want to get off the rez this summer," Hadley says. "It'll be too easy to use. There's no school, so people just run around and smoke."

He's thinking of hitchhiking to Wyoming and living with one of his father's ex-wives.

"Or maybe I'll go to Fort Collins," he says. "There's a girl there that's gonna have my baby."

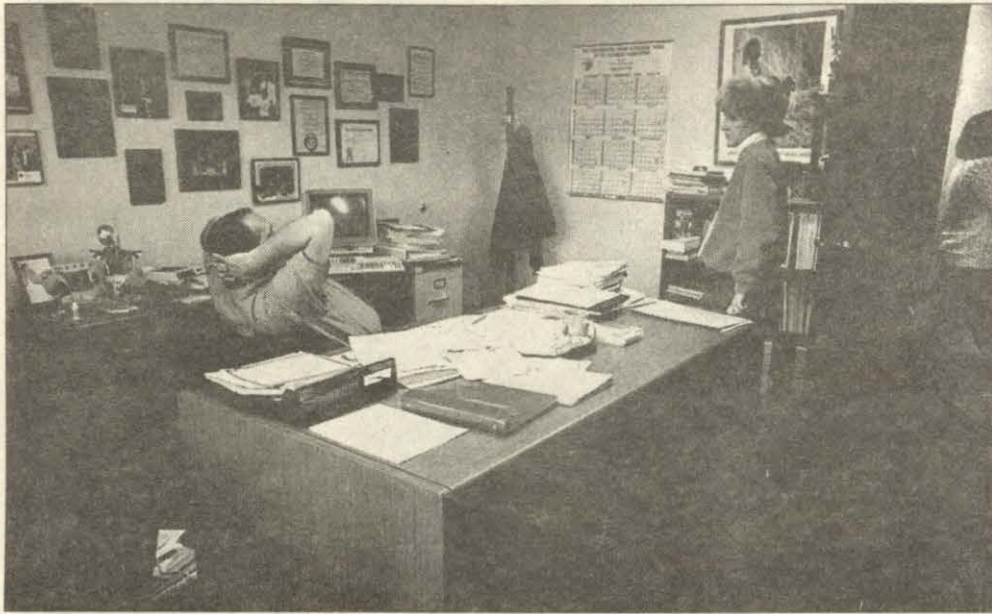
Hadley sets his foot down on the kitchen floor. He's not worried about how he'll get to Colorado, or Wyoming or wherever. His Air Jordans will carry him there.

"These are shoes that have hitchhiked all over the road," he says.

"I tell them I don't have any drugs, that I'm trying to quit, and they just laugh at me."

— Hadley Big Back

MONTANA'S INDIANS



While a housing director from the Flathead Reservation (left) receives awards for his achievements, the largest Indian contractor (below) in the nation, continues to battle the Blackfeet Tribal Council over houses he constructed. See their stories inside.



Reservation living is not always ideal. Most reservations in Montana are isolated without an abundance of natural resources. Although housing conditions on the reservations throughout Montana are poor, Indians who live in Montana's cities don't fare much better. They fight discrimination and housing shortages. See their stories inside.

Special thanks to the Missoulian for publishing this special report.

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