

from **ABERDEEN NEWS**

January 23, 2003

Blackfoot tribe immerses students in language to counter 'manifest destiny'

By Fred Tasker Knight Ridder News Service

BLACKFEET RESERVATION, MONT. - "Tsa nii ksistikowatts sa-ahsi?" teacher Shirley Crowshoe asks her class of elementary students sitting in a circle on a thick rug in a bright, modern classroom. "What kind of day is it outside?"

Jessie DesRosier, 13, is quick to raise his hand: "Sugapii ksisko, ahstosopo," he says. "Nice day, cold wind."

Jessie is one of a handful younger than 60 in the 15,000-member tribe on this isolated reservation who can speak its native language. He's one of 31 students in a total immersion school in the Blackfoot language and culture set up by Darrell Kipp, Harvard-trained historian of the Blackfoot Tribe, and teacher Dorothy Still Smoking.

They created it because too few Blackfoot children knew the tribe's language and customs.

"It was a legacy of when children were sent to government mission schools and weren't allowed to speak their own language or follow their religion or customs," says Arthur Westwolf, a teacher at the school.

The school teaches everything in Blackfoot, even math.

"It's an effort to bring healing and positive self-identity to our children," Kipp says. The Browning school is being copied widely among America's tribes as part of the "renegotiation of reality" movement that has tribes telling their side of the Lewis & Clark Expedition story during its 200th anniversary over the next three years, Kipp says.

He hopes it's not too late. In 1900 there were 300 viable Indian languages, he says. Today there are 185. In 30 years there will be fewer than 20, because the majority of native speakers today are older than 60.

Jessie, whose Blackfoot name is Cree Talker in English, and Ahsinapoyii in the Blackfoot language, is getting instruction in Blackfoot culture. On one cold winter day, he joins his class in a simplified version of the tribe's Sun Dance, as classmate Mack Momberg, 8, (Blackfoot name Piitakkatsimann) pounds on a drum.

The doubters have been proved wrong, she said.

Soon Jessie must go to the mountain, a coming-of-age ritual as American as a Latin quince or a Jewish bar mitzvah. He will build a sweat lodge of branches and grass and go four days without food or water, trying to have the powerful dream required of young Blackfoot men.

"The animal he dreams about will become his power," says Westwolf. "He may change his name to honor that animal."

Westwolf sees great promise in Jessie. But, like other bicultural children in America, the youth is torn between old and new.

"I'm grooming him to be a teacher," says Westwolf.

Says Jessie: "I think I want to be a Marine."