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OCTOBER , 2001

## **Real Speak** **Language Revival Among the Montana Blackfeet**

by Alice Beck Kehoe

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"Ok', neskun, tsa ni tapi?" ("Hi, little brother, how are you?"), the round-faced, dark-eyed little boy called out to his schoolmate. As they chattered, shoppers in Teeple's Supermarket turned to take notice. It had been years since anyone had heard a Pikuni (Montana Blackfoot) child speak the native language so naturally. The children were students from Moccasin Flat School in Browning, the agency town for the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. Moccasin Flat is one of three Blackfoot-language immersion schools in the town. These schools, ringing with children's light steps and laughter, are flagships for today's renaissance of American Indian languages and cultures. In the Moccasin Flat School, a sign on the door requests, "Please do not speak English here."

For two centuries, the United States has appeared to expect Indians to either assimilate into Anglo culture or retreat into extinction. Thomas Jefferson expanded the policy--initiated by President Washington--to establish government-subsidized trading posts on the frontier, providing manufactured cloth and agricultural tools. Treaties were written to include such things as tools, livestock, and farming instructors in exchange for Indian land. Church missions received federal assistance to promote European-style agriculture among Indians, even among the many Indian nations that had maintained agricultural economies for hundreds of years. Familiar with the eighteenth-century philosophers' vision of a world history originating with nomadic hunters, then progressing through simple farm villages to cities and commerce, Jefferson assumed that intelligent Indians would desire assimilation once they saw that European plow agriculture, privately owned land, and English were necessary components of civilization.

Two centuries of resistance have exposed the fallacy of his view. American Indian nations took what they found relatively cheap and useful--wool cloth, brass and steel, livestock, and crops such as peaches--to enrich their economies. They learned English for commercial and diplomatic purposes, just as they had learned other Indian languages, but they remained distinct and, in many aspects, separate nations. Several invented printable syllabaries or alphabets for their own languages, creating newspapers and published constitutions. Young persons destined for leadership were even sent to U.S. schools. Among them was Ely Parker, a Seneca who rose to the rank of brigadier general in the Union Army, commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Grant's administration, and Donehogawa sachem (chiefs' council member) of the Six Nations Iroquois.

Taking what was advantageous from the invaders did not negate the value of their own cultures. A far greater challenge was posed by the U.S. policy of assimilation. President Grant ordered his army to crush Indian sovereignty as it had the Confederate South. Disregarding First Amendment scruples against the establishment of sectarian religion, Grant officially gave management of Indian reservations to church missions. Agents,

supported by their own police, forbade indigenous customs ranging from polygamy, communal ownership of resources, and ceremonies to clothing and hairstyles. Children were kept in boarding schools to enforce conversion to Christian "civilization."

Agnes Chief All Over, a Montana Blackfoot born in 1882, recalled in 1939 her first days in the reservation boarding school:

First time sat at table with utensils. Didn't know how to dish out or eat. Watched others and followed them and imitated them. Scared of everything, even the school building. Window high up and asked how they go out--told that one climbed a ladder [steps]. Dinner was meat, gravy and potatoes. Through, got up to walk out. One of the white waitresses came over and pulled out her chair and told her "Sit down." Didn't know English. Didn't understand. Other child explained--not to walk out until the others did.

Bell rang--imitated others--pushed chairs under table. Bell rang again--walked out of doors.

Told friend, "Want to go to toilet." There's little house--we'll go to the back of it. Done several times before matron found out. Asked all the children who did it. Insima [Agnes' mother, sitting in] told-- Matron took them to privies. Pick up dress, unbutton pants [first she had ever worn], sit on hole. Afraid to sit on hole. Afraid she'll go through and told other girl to hold her hands tight. Girl buttoned her pants, and she did same for other girl. Matron stood and laughed at them. Kept talking, but they didn't understand her English.

First time slept on spring bed--every time moved, bed would rock. Scared something under bed. First time ever had slept alone. Other girl scared and crying. Finally got in bed together.

Next morning got up about six o'clock. Someone woke her up--didn't remember where she was. Woke other up. Walked around easy--afraid floor would break through. Every time they stepped on floor, it creaked, and they got scared. Walk out to hall--backed up--scared. Rest of girls tell them to walk down. Refused. Finally sat on step, feet on next step, and both got down that way, hanging on to bannisters. Every time the stairs squeaked, they cried. [Sue Sommers Dietrich Papers, Marquette University Archives, courtesy of Mrs. Dietrich.] "

Agnes was luckier than most. Nearly every Friday, her grandmother or mother would come with fruit, candy, or cookies to see her at the school. Her parents--her father and his three wives--said, "It is good for Agnes to be educated and learn the white language. When we have any work, men come here and we don't understand them or they us, and they don't know our sign language. We must have someone to speak English." Agnes' parents didn't realize that the schools would brutally stamp out the children's native language by punishing any youngster who let slip a word that wasn't English.

### **To save their heritage**

A century later, another Montana Blackfoot, Darrell Kipp, produced a video about the boarding school. Kipp is descended from a band wantonly massacred by federal troops in 1870. In his eyes, the brick shell of the boarding school today testifies to the hollowness of

the "civilization" imposed on his people. Empty and impotent now, the school and its successors had overwhelmed the Blackfeet as surely as Colonel Baker's soldiers did that village in 1870. Agnes Chief All Over, in the first generation born after her people were assigned to a reservation, was bilingual. Her children spoke Blackfoot but used English in their homes, wanting their own youngsters to feel at ease with the language in school and business. Their children--the people of Darrell Kipp's generation--recall hearing grandparents speak Blackfoot but didn't use it themselves. Parents among today's Montana Blackfeet admit that, while growing up, they never heard their native language in everyday conversation. They couldn't absorb images embedded within the language, nor feel the spirituality inherent in those images.

In the 1980s, Kipp and his colleague, Dorothy Still Smoking, realized that their nation faced a crisis. Their ancestral language, and all the nuances of knowledge it encompassed, would soon be irretrievably lost. Nothing would remain but a few bald texts phonetically transcribed by linguists early in the twentieth century. So they became activists. A small group of men and women, parents seeing their children growing into adulthood bereft of even dimly remembered sounds, were determined to work against this fate.

Congress passed the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act in 1978. This promise of federal funds encouraged reservations to develop local postsecondary schools, primarily two-year associate-degree programs whose graduates could go into clerical or skilled-trades jobs. Blackfeet Community College was one of these 1980s projects. It was bleakly housed in trailers and an old log building on the highway at the edge of Browning. Most students were adults with family responsibilities. The faculty wanted to strengthen the community and its shared Pikuni heritage. Merely teaching job skills on a High Plains reservation well over a hundred miles from any city wouldn't help these families. Although the college seemed to provide the opportunity to teach Blackfoot language and history, most students had enough difficulties with the job-related courses. Little energy was left for mastering a difficult language for which they had no primers, no textbooks, and few tapes.

Still Smoking, with an Ed.D., is now president of the college, while Kipp, with an M.F.A. in writing from Goddard College and an M.A. in social policy from Harvard, still teaches writing (in English). But they soon realized that the community college alone could not save their heritage. Consequently, they tried another tack.

Still Smoking became director of the Head Start program in Browning, seeking Blackfoot-speaking aides and encouraging them to use their native language with the children. Kipp focused on a more radical and risky strategy: the creation of independent Blackfoot-language immersion schools. These decisions were quite audacious, projecting for the economically depressed reservation a set of neighborhood schools free of the regulations that come with federal funds. Astonishingly, Kipp and Still Smoking carried it off. Through these complementary efforts, Blackfoot might again be the first language for at least a core group of Pikuni.

In 1994, Kipp and Still Smoking attended a bilingual education conference where they met kindred souls, the leaders of the native Hawaiian Punana Leo immersion schools. Punana Leo reacted to the crisis of the last fluent Hawaiian speakers dying off by reconstructing cradles of their language in small Hawaiian-language-only schools. The Hawaiians eagerly

mentored the Blackfoot educators. Kipp recalls that they were always available for telephone consultation, in addition to their participation in the annual conferences for native language programs. Avoiding entanglement with government funding, the Piegan Institute (a nonprofit organization for Montana's Blackfoot heritage) tapped Jane Fonda, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and others for seed money and then for more substantial grants.

### **Blackfoot-immersion curricula**

The Montana Blackfeet Reservation carries a range of heritage programs. Kipp and Still Smoking's remarkable Moccasin Flat, Cuts Wood, and Lost Children immersion schools (the two more recent are named after plucky children in Blackfoot legends) are cocoons where young children grow as Blackfeet, though they remain familiar with the external world. Each school is built as a single large classroom where children readily cooperate and assist one another. The buildings are well constructed, bright, colorfully furnished, and have a view of the Rockies, the "Backbone of the World" as the Pikuni call them.

Like Punana Leo children, some of whom are now entering college, the Nizi Puh Wah Sin (Blackfoot for "Real Speak") children test high on English-language state and national proficiency exams. The reservation's public school system includes, besides the Head Start program's language exposure, language and Blackfoot history units coordinated by Leon Rattler. Although a few parents who are committed to evangelical Christian churches object to the program's recognition of Blackfoot philosophy in the cultural heritage curricula, most families want to see Blackfoot widely incorporated into their public schools.

Today, Blackfeet Community College offers formal courses in Blackfoot language, philosophy, and history. The reservation's annual July North American Indian Days powwow, established in the 1930s out of the Fourth of July celebrations permitted by Bureau of Indian Affairs agents (who otherwise quashed ceremonies and dances), draws Blackfeet from cities across the country to reunite with their relatives and legacy. The federally funded Museum of the Plains Indian, built as a New Deal project during the Depression, displays and sells contemporary art and a good selection of books, among them the 1970s series of elders' reminiscences and legends published in English by the Browning Public Schools' Blackfeet Heritage Program. Tours of historic reservation locations are offered by entrepreneur Curly Wagner, who says that putting these significant places on a par with other U.S. tourist attractions helps validate Blackfoot history.

But can Western institutions--such as schools--successfully transmit American Indian heritages? Thirty-three Indian-controlled colleges make up the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, whose mandate derives from the 1978 Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act. In fact, the very term tribal college is becoming obsolete as these colleges work to raise consciousness that Native American peoples were and remain nations, not "tribes" (a word originated by the Romans for politically weak communities). Invading Europeans and westward- pushing Americans faced independent nations with which they ultimately concluded treaties. There was no legitimate question of the sovereignty of the opposing nations. Nor was that sovereignty nullified in 1831 when Chief Justice John Marshall invented the strange phrase "domestic dependent nations" to give legitimacy to the U.S. abrogation of Cherokee rights. In contrast, Canadian indigenous nations have recently pioneered use of the term First Nations. Now preferred in Canada, it

is gradually coming into general use in the United States. The reservation colleges controlled by the First Nations are offering more heritage courses, noting that as students gain respect for their forebears, they are inspired to persist.

### **Can the effort survive?**

Can colleges really help preserve the heritage of the First Nations? Colleges, after all, are a quintessential Western institution. They emphasize schedules, writing, lecturing professors, and passive, note-taking students, all contrary to Native American learning traditions. Formal instruction of small groups of adolescents by respected adults certainly was not uncommon among First Nations, but generally children learned by watching and trying. As Agnes Chief All Over recalled:

"Running Wolf had three boys and one girl. [One] boy said to girls, his sister and Agnes, "You'd better come with us, we're going buffalo hunting." Took long strings, told us to bring knives and clothes. They started to snare gophers. Told us to skin the gophers and cut them up. Killed about eight and we skinned and cut them. We started home. We had a play tipi near the house made by the boys. (The oldest was eight years old.) Made a fire outside the play tipi and ate the gophers."

"When I got home Mother told me I smelled funny. My mouth was all greasy. Told her what I had eaten. Grandmother told her [Agnes] they were good to eat, as they clean out the system. Didn't tell her not to eat any more. [Sue Sommers Dietrich Papers, Marquette University Archives, courtesy of Mrs. Dietrich.] "

Kipp came back to the reservation and relearned his grandparents' way. "People go to work, or go to ceremonies, because it is a good thing to be there, to be with other people, cooperating," he reflects. "Maybe you sit around a long time, maybe you work energetically to provide what is needed. Courtesy and consideration, not a mechanical clock, manage the day. You stop and look at the mountains, because they are beautiful. Around us are animals and plants, kinds of people who have different forms, their own ways of life, often willing to help humans in a spirit of mutual respect."

The Nizi Puh Wah Sin one-room schools in Browning are designed to foster the experience of being Blackfoot. With the schools' open-education style, the children are immersed in a way of living. "We don't believe in playgrounds," Kipp explains, offering an example. "We have the kids run. The kids play in the brush. They come back with sticks. They invent twig houses, stack sticks, make cars, make airplanes, horses, and cows. Our people were outdoors all the time."

There is, literally, a price for this. Kipp and Still Smoking say that the Nizi Puh Wah Sin schools need an endowment of three million dollars to ensure teacher salaries, upkeep, and activities. Parents are asked to pay one hundred dollars monthly tuition for each child, with the option of working at ten dollars an hour credited to payment. With a ratio of only seven students per teacher, tuition cannot support the schools even if all families were able to pay cash, so the Piegan Institute solicits donations for scholarships. Tribal colleges, too, seek donations and foundation grants to supplement allocated federal funds. A very few First Nations now enjoy profits from casinos sufficient to operate good schools--

Wisconsin Potawatomi hit it big with a casino in Milwaukee, spinning off hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Indian Community School serving Indian families in the city--but the majority, like the Montana Blackfeet, are poorly situated for casinos.

Whether they are language-immersion elementary schools or tribal colleges, most First Nations schools focusing on transmitting their heritage struggle to build a financial base. For Kipp, Still Smoking, and increasing numbers of other First Nations members, it's now do or die--and they will not say die.

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