

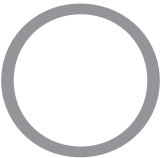
F O U R D A Y S

North American Indian Days
on the Blackfeet Reservation, Browning, Montana



Evie Lovett
photographs


Suzanne Kingsbury
text

 ON THE FIFTH OF JULY, 2006, Evie Lovett and I left at dawn from Brattleboro, Vermont and arrived twelve hours later in the town of Browning, Montana on the Blackfeet Indian reservation, thirteen miles east of what the Blackfeet call the “Backbone of the World”, in the foothills of the magnificent Rockies. Acknowledged as one of the most powerful tribes in the American northwest, the Blackfeet, or the Piegans, are part of a confederacy of three independent tribes, living in Montana and Alberta, Canada.

We were in Browning for North American Indian Days, one of the largest gatherings of the United States and Canadian tribes where tipis are pitched on the powwow grounds and for four days Browning is filled with drumming, singing, contest dancing, rodeos, parades and celebration. During that time, Evie documented what she saw with her camera, and I documented my own observations in a little black notebook.

Why were we drawn to Browning? Why is the wind drawn in a certain direction? Perhaps we were drawn by the simple fact of celebration, the mystery of medicine bundles, the high tessitura of Blackfeet singing, the ancient gravesites with carved names that tell a story: Kicking Woman, Comes at Night, Old Person and Scabby Robe. Perhaps my best answer is that we were drawn there because our culture lost something sacred long ago, and each of us, in our small way, is searching to reclaim it. And in that seeking, maybe we were able to answer an eternal, constant question: What does the power of the human spirit look like?

Suzanne Kingsbury

ORTH AMERICAN INDIAN DAYS is a time for the celebration of Blackfeet identity, what it was and what it is today. These photos show what I saw during three four-day visits to Indian Days, four days each year that are unlike any others in Browning.

At first my attention was pulled right into the center, the circular arbor that is the nucleus of the action of North American Indian Days, where the dancing and drumming take place. As the days rolled on, I realized that much of the life of Indian Days takes place outside the arbor, in the encampment, where families gather in lodges, tents, around picnic tables, coming to be together from as close as two blocks away and as far as Canada.

I was struck by the comfortable coexistence of iconic images of Indians in feathers and buckskin with images of 21st century reality.

I am an outsider, a descendant of the white culture that very nearly decimated the Blackfeet. And yet I don't think I've ever been met with such warmth and openness while photographing. I was invited into lodges and fed potato salad. My interest was welcomed. That was heartwarming, as I'm uncomfortable photographing people unless given permission.

Thank you, Browning, Montana.

Thank you to our hosts, Darrell and Roberta Kipp. Roberta is a long-time fixture at the Browning Middle School. Darrell, a descendent of one of the few survivors of the Baker Massacre in 1870, started the Piegan Institute, which instructs Blackfeet children in the Blackfeet or Piegan language.

Thank you, Suzanne, for enriching my photographs with your writing and making the energy of Indian Days alive for this Vermont audience.

Evie Lovett

We come to the arbor in the late afternoon, on the tails of an endless caravan of vans and pick-up trucks, cars and RVs. We can already hear the drums, the sound of ankle rattles and silver bells on buckskin pants. A boy in miniature buckskin stands in the dust, waiting to dance, the eagle feather in his shadow like a pointed arrow.



Of the 564 tribes in the U.S., the Blackfeet Tribe is one of only six tribes that still lives on ancestral lands. Archeological discoveries show they've been on the land for thousands of years. I watch a dignified gentleman, standing near his tipi, POW patches and military medals on his starched white shirt. He wears bones at his throat, rabbit fur hanging from his hip, and his headdress like a powerful bird, alights from his crown.



While the loudspeaker announces dancing competitions, numbers of dancers, times of the giveaways, Blackfeet open the sides of vans to make quick camp. Along the endless prairie, tipis shoot up, their spines of stripped lodge pole pines, like the quills of a giant porcupine, making stark shadows in the grass.



Lester Johnson from Browning tells us the significance of the dances: Grass dancers are warriors, they don't dance when they enter the arbor for the Grand Entry, because they are warriors and have attitude. Chicken Dance, a courting dance, resurrected in the last ten years is uniquely Blackfeet. Fancy is the most rigorous and utterly un-steeped in culture, all for show. Buckskins are the traditional old guys, who don't do anything else. The Traditional Men's: they act alert, their heads whipping around, watching for enemies and animals. Jingle women's dresses have 365 jingles on them, signaling a year. This concept came from a dream.



From 1883-84, some 600 Blackfeet died of starvation because of the sudden extinction of Buffalo. In 1896 the Northern Rockies were taken from the Blackfeet for 1.5 million dollars because speculators believed there were rich minerals to be had.



Blackfeet are the only tribe to paint their tipis. Painted tipis are sacred, each has a unique story. They used to be made from buffalo hide, now they're of heavy cloth. Harold John Gallagher Horn explains his lodge has four red stripes for the four directions, and a depiction of the Big Dipper; on the back: a butterfly. "White people," he says, "Their god is the dollar. For Indians, all is god. I am only 13/16 full-blood. The rest Irish."



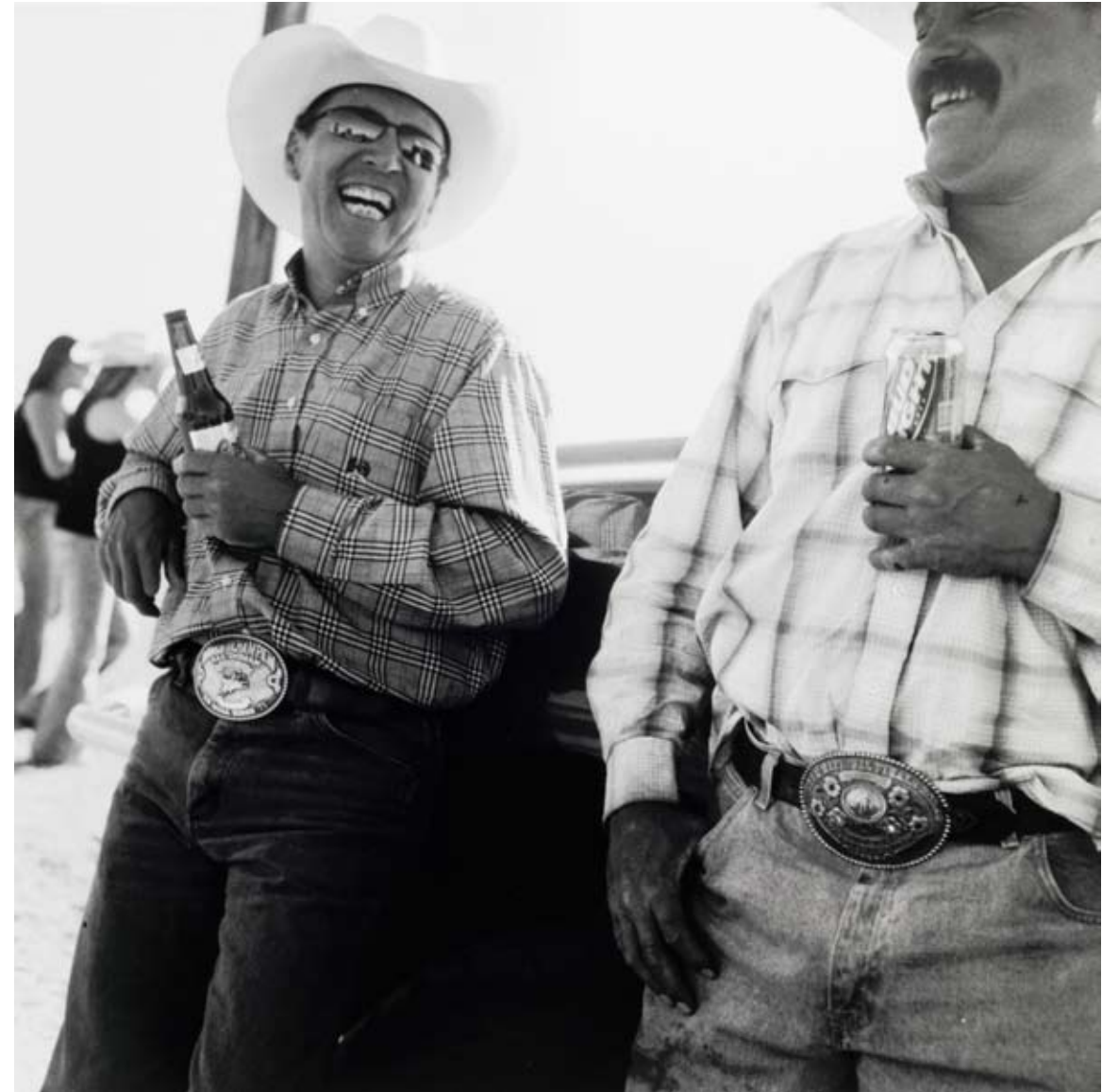
The Blackfeet territory was once bigger than Montana. Today it's about the size of Delaware, bordered by Canada to the north, Glacier Park and the Rockies to the west, and the prairie and wilderness to the southeast. The Blackfeet ended up with the land that was most sacred to them (their present day reservation), but this was not the U.S. government's conscious intention. The land the Blackfeet happened to want most, the U.S. wanted least.



The air smells of whipped sugar in cotton candy machines, and corn and chili dogs sold from the side door of the Hungry Indian Café. The Browning United Methodist church tells us we are all related, and I watch ladies in bells and feathers, standing in front of the BIA police trailer, laughing. A bearded, big-bellied man behind a plywood stand beckons. He's ferrying wares: feathered earrings, charmed rabbits feet, turquoise pendants, too shiny to be real.



Across the dusty length of prairie rodeo clowns wear frayed stars and stripes and goad the bulls. It smells of manure, ice cream. Men sit along the metal fence in fringed chaps, tipping their hats, their belt buckles, big as saucers, glint in the sun. The buckshoot holds back a cowboy wearing a mouthguard, an American flag and the flag of the Blackfeet on his vest. His ancestors used to run stolen horses across this border, profitable, yes, and also a feat of bravery and valor.



At night the cool wind comes down from Canada. The immense sky turns the color of ink, Carnie stands light up like colored stars. In a gaming tent, people play the stick game with marked or unmarked “bones”. The song they sing is soothing, an unearthly sound. They rock to and fro, juggling bones under shawls, hats, scarves. I meet a man, white like me, who was married to a Crow “my one and only love”. She died of a brain tumor. Now he wanders the pow wow circuit. A weathered man of indeterminate age, he rides the Ferris wheel with me. The clicking sound of the stick game continues all night.



In the old days the Blackfeet were hunters, they were warriors. Their main source of sustenance was buffalo meat. They were considered the best horsemen on the Great Plains. An eight year old boy rides backward on his horse. His mother tells me he placed First in Bareback in his age group. Started on a wooly sheep at three.



Velvet nights, the tempo of the singing picks up, that high tessitura competing with that howling wind, and the echo of the bells around the dancers ankles, swish of chicken feathers on a dancer's bustle. Walking home at one a.m., I see two teenaged boys on bareback, riding barefoot. One calls hep, slap of hand to hide, and they're racing across Route 2 into a cold, clear night.



In the morning the dancers line up at the mouth of the arbor to dance, bursts of color, of feathers, every inch alive. Women are decorated in necklaces of sweet grass, bracelets of elk and deer teeth. Men carry knives in painted scabbards, wear knee and ankle fetlocks, eagle head and eagle wings, clothes of buffalo and deer, antelope and elk. The air smells of dust, of fry bread and cigarettes and sweat.



During those four days there isn't just one face to the Blackfeet, there are thousands: grandfather in full feather headdress; square- faced grandma in leather coat; braided child with her toy shotgun, reaching her painted fingernails for money at the cracked ticket booth; plump, round faces of newborns; women in Bermuda shorts sitting in lawn chairs under sun umbrellas; man on a four wheeler with this little dog riding the hood; men wearing earrings of bone, feathers pinned to their hats with fishing lures.



Each of the three Blackfoot tribes (the Siksika, the Kainah or Bloods, and the Piegan,) were subdivided into clans, such as Black-Elks, Lone-fighters, Fat Roasters, White Breasts. A man tells us he's a Blood. He was in Vietnam, still has his mother's bundle. His mother's tipi. He explains what the markings mean, and tells us a medicine bundle can contain many sacred things, paint, hides, knives, pipes, tobacco, or the war shirt of someone who survived or died.



Everywhere the snap of American flags. I buy dollar Cokes, throw basketballs in a clown's mouth, walk across the matted grass, listening to the call of the drummers from the arbor, see sassy school girl kissing boy behind a trailer. At the rodeo, a boy flies around the track without saddle, without shirt, almost pornographic in his beauty, the casualness of ability.



I read in *Blackfeet Riders of the Northwestern Plains*, that women came to the dance floor in early 1950s, before that they stood behind the drums and sang. The Sun Dance was always in mid-summer. Four days of fasting, praying, dancing and drumming. They used a section of a tree trunk with skin stretched over it to drum. They used rattles and whistles, and members were honored for valor, for dexterity, for generosity.



During the dances, I am hypnotized by the blur of color, the dancers like spinning birds, their glossy hair, braided with beads, swinging, breastplates of bone, feet lightly touching the arbor green. Afterward, I see the dancers walking the grounds, a chicken dance contender in sunglasses, wheeling a baby, his boy in fat sneakers, with long black braids down his back, his face still painted with starred figures.



Kids find shelter from the sun under the tailgate of a pickup, the painted plywood board reads, Operation Iraqi Freedom and lists names of missing boys. I watch a man with half-lidded eyes, long black hair parted in the middle, pretty, thick lips, tattooed biceps and a Harvard t-shirt cut at the sleeves, showing off ropey muscles. Another man talks to me in front of his tipi, hands crossed. In the old days there were boarding schools, he survived by running away so many times the school got sick of chasing.



The Blackfeet are artists in fine quick embroidery and beadwork. These traditions go back to a time when there weren't any horses, they had to hunt on foot. Their tradition says the Sun Power is everywhere, in the mountains, the lakes, rivers, in birds and every animal, and this can be transferred to people, the gift usually comes in the form of songs, through the medium of some animal or bird.



Songs went on all day and all night. Songs for the dancers, songs for the giveaways, gambling songs. There weren't words to the songs that I could hear, just those isometric and isorhythmic structures starting in high falsetto. Songs are associated with difficult feats learned in visions, I have heard that a long time ago, doctors sang while working cures.



“All the Blackfeet universe,” Malcolm McFee stated in *Modern Blackfeet*, “was invested with a pervasive supernatural power that could be met within the natural environment.” The Blackfeet were always considered horse racers, foot racers, and they were dreamers. They sometimes tortured themselves to prepare for medicine dreams, finding a perch on a mountain top or a known buffalo trail where they spent four days and nights without water or food, waiting for a medicine dream.



Away from the arbor, away from the celebration of Indian Days: Golden prairie grass, dotted with white crosses, tri-colored pickups, horses grooming one another in backyards, bursts of sturdy thin trees, picture book clouds and windmills, a man on crutches stands by the coffee shack. I am reading a book that says the wind sometimes lifts empty railcars off the tracks, I can hear wind against the chain link fences.



Boys in hoop earrings and turned baseball caps drum with their eyes closed, and grant us certain silence when they pause for a phrase or two in the last stanza, the wind smells of Russian sage grass, juniper and purple perennials growing along jack leg fences, the sun glitters on beaded headbands, you can hear the quick whirr of feathered fans, the sounds of ringing bells when the bodies begin to dance, you can feel the heat from a low red sun, setting above the continental divide.



From the Blackfeet Nation website:

American Indian culture has not only survived 150 years of an intensive effort to eradicate it, it is once again flourishing and undergoing a rebirth, a revitalization...But to understand our culture, or any American Indian culture, it is useful to understand why it has refused to die. Through it all, we Blackfeet have remained a deeply spiritual people that have struggled to preserve and protect our culture, language, way of life, and way of thinking. We have an incredibly rich heritage of traditions, customs, beliefs, art, and stories. We have kept the flame of our culture alive through times when it was in constant danger of being extinguished. Today, thanks to our elders and ancestors who kept it flickering, the flame is burning brighter and brighter every year. It will soon be a blaze that will eventually outshine and outlive societies with shallower roots, a weaker notion of who they are and why they are here, and a lesser sense of obligation to the natural world, their community, and to each other.

On the web: <http://www.piegainstitute.org/>
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