"'ASKING FOR SURVIVAL': THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL REVITALIZATION ON THE FORT BELKNAP RESERVATION"

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I

Located on the high plains of north-central Montana, the Little Rocky Mountains form the southern boundary of the Fort Belknap Reservation. In contrast to their relatively flat and arid surroundings, these isolated, fertile mountains constitute a stunning and ecologically novel presence, which has, for a variety of reasons, inspired the reverence of several tribes in the region--most notably the Fort Belknap Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes. Perceiving their distinctiveness in the area, the Assiniboine called the Little Rockies the "island mountains."[1] Similarly, scientists today consider the range to be part of a distinct "inland archipelago" of "moist, forested mountains," which are surrounded by a ocean of windswept grassland.[2] The Little Rockies, in other words, can be considered an ecological oasis that has historically played a profoundly significant role in the cultural development of the Northern Plains. They continue to do so today, although under less pristine circumstances.

Within this narrow geographical context it is possible to perceive historical continuity--an ongoing continuum between the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. In each of these periods, the Little Rockies ecosystem has played a pivotal role in the economic, political, and religious adaptations of the Fort Belknap tribes. Since the 1860s, that ecosystem has included gold mining, characterized by increasingly modernized techniques of mineral extraction.[3] The ongoing conflict between these mining developments and traditional native associations with the Little Rockies sheds light on the complex relationships between cultural development and natural environment of the region. Exploring these correlations will provide a better understanding of Native American

cultural revitalization efforts on the Northern Plains of the United States.

Anthony Wallace has defined a revitalization movement as "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture."[4] This process of cultural adaptation, in which dramatic revisions can occur in as little time as one generation, is commonly initiated by stress--"a condition in which some part, or the whole of the social organism is threatened with more or less serious damage."[5] When a particular world-view no longer contributes to a reduction in cultural tension, individuals possessing that belief system must choose whether to go on tolerating the stress or modify their world-view in an attempt to create a more acceptable way of life.[6]

In the case of the Fort Belknap Assiniboine and Gros Ventre, the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries represent two periods of intense cultural redefinition initiated by tribal members. Although substantially different in character, these revitalization efforts can be viewed as turning points in the historical development of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre--transitions that introduced prolonged periods of gradual readjustment. Significantly, both transitional periods grew out of, and were inspired by, Assiniboine and Gros Ventre associations with the Little Rocky mountains. Moreover, both periods roughly coincide with the two major eras of intensive gold mining development in these isolated highlands. The first time of transition, occurring in the period of mining development that extended from 1884-1936, can be considered a "vitalistic movement" which "emphasize(d) the importation of alien elements" into a preexisting, and no longer acceptable, world-view.[7] The second era, has emerged since 1979, the year intensive gold mining developments resumed in the Little Rockies, and continues through the

present time. This significant period can be considered a "revivalistic movement" that "emphasize(s) the institution of customs, values, and even aspects of nature" which were part of the world-view "of previous generations but are not now present."[8] Despite their differences, both transitional periods can be considered crucial times of Assiniboine and Gros Ventre adaptation and cultural survival. It should be noted that while Wallace has outlined several other types of revitalization movements, these particular varieties will provide the comparative model for this study.

Particularly within the last decade, there has been a dramatic resurgence of indigenous spirituality and a corresponding development of environmental activism on the Fort Belknap Reservation. In many respects the extent to which the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre again practice the religion of their ancestors echoes the degree to which there is a revised environmental awareness in their community. Recent circumstances suggest that reservations perceiving worsening environmental circumstances are simultaneously experiencing a dramatic return to traditional Native American spiritual values. This interrelationship is demonstrated in the case of Fort Belknap where an environmental crisis has helped promote and strengthen a religious revival in recent years. This revitalization movement has coincided with the resumption of cyanide heap-leach gold mining in the Little Rocky Mountains.

Before a specific discussion of the historical significance of the Fort Belknap example can be undertaken, however, some general discussion of traditional Gros Ventre and Assiniboine culture is necessary. It is important to realize that while these tribes inhabit the same reservation and share the same essential religious values, they possess distinctive languages, ceremonies, oral traditions, and cultural histories.

Nonetheless, the similarities between the two tribes' traditional world-views are, in this study, more significant than their differences.

Like many native cultures on the Northern Plains, traditional Assiniboines and Gros Ventres--that is those tribal members who embrace the "essential values" of their respective cultures--tend to discern an intimate relationship between the worldly and the divine.[9] As Charles Ereaux, a Gros Ventre, who has "come to take up the Indian culture" explained, "the whole earth is our mother, which is sacred. Everything that we live with, that nourishes us, that houses us, that cloths us, comes from the earth and she is meant to be respected."[10] The earth, in other words, is not divorced from the Creator or Great Spirit, but rather is a complex and dynamic manifestation of it. The traditional members of the Fort Belknap tribes consider themselves to be part and parcel of this sacred, interrelated totality, but they also perceive their dependence upon it for physical and spiritual sustenance.

For this reason, religion is an integral part of Assiniboine and Gros Ventre cultural relationships with the natural environment of the Little Rockies region. This fundamental association cannot be segregated from other aspects of daily life.[11] "A lot of people say that if you want to hunt correctly you make an offering to a successful hunt," said a young Gros Ventre living on Fort Belknap. "You couldn't separate religion from everyday life. It was too intertwined. It was all necessary."[12] Traditional culture among Fort Belknap's tribes united the physical and the spiritual within the natural context of the Little Rocky Mountains.

Both tribes recognize, however, that the power of the Great Spirit extends beyond its embodiment in natural phenomena. Supernatural assistance is, therefore, sought and communicated individually through prayer, dreams, and visions, and through more communal rituals, such as

the sweat bath or annual Sun Dance. Virgil McConnell, an Assiniboine elder, explained this process, stating "I'm not saying that the Indian has the answer to everything--he doesn't. But there's ways of finding answers in our religion if you practice this belief and go to the Sun Dance. You go fast in the mountains. That's how we get our answers."[13] Similarly, John Capture, a Gros Ventre elder, described the Little Rockies as "a natural college."[14] Nature, in other words, reveals the divine and simultaneously provides the arena in which ceremonies are performed and the sacred can be petitioned for special knowledge and assistance. The fact that the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre were once nomadic did not prevent them from developing permanent attachments to particular geographic locations. Their traditional connections to the earth are grounded in specific regions, like the Little Rockies, that have historically inspired feelings of reverence and essential cultural value.

Several Northern Plains tribes, especially those inhabiting Fort Belknap, frequented the Little Rocky Mountains because they provided the basic necessities of human life, and served as access points between the divine and the human.[15] Assiniboine elder Dora Helgeson's grandparents, for instance, spoke of "annual pilgrimages to the Little Rockies or Island Mountains."[16] Like an oasis, the region attracted several different tribal cultures. "There's quite a few things that you can just get in these mountains," explained George Horse Capture, Jr.; "It's just like a storehouse."[17] As Joe Azure noted, many tribes used the Little Rockies for camping because they provided clean water, game tipi poles and firewood. "Everything was provided by these mountains. That's why they were always considered holy and sacred by all the tribes of the Great Plains."[18] Because the power of life was apparently more concentrated there, the Little Rockies were perceived as a place in which the Creator

was more abundantly manifested.

For this reason Fort Belknap's mountains became a place of immense cultural significance, particularly for the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine peoples. "The old timers used to tell us there's seven main peaks in the Little Rocky Mountains, and each one of them was used as fasting altars for the Indian People," said McConnell.[19] It was on one of these main peaks, according to Theresa Lame Bull, that one of her tribes' two sacred pipes was received, "just like Moses getting the ten commandments."[20] John Capture, another Gros Ventre elder, described "several burial locations in the Little Rocky Mountains."[21]

Thus, as a storehouse, cemetery , ceremonial arena, and sacred shrine, the Little Rockies were, quite simply, the locus of cultural activity and tribal identity for the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine. Edgar S. Cahn conveys the complexity of this notion in maintaining that

> The relationship of a tribe to its land defines that tribe; its identity; its culture; its way of life; its fundamental rights; its method of adaption; its pattern of survival. Land also defines the Indians enemies--those who covet the land and desire to expropriate it for their own use.[22]

Tribal being on Fort Belknap is, in large measure, derived from, and characterized by, the ecological setting of the Little Rocky Mountains. Charles Ereaux, a Gros Ventre, emphasized this reality, stating, "because this is our homeland, the Little Rockies are the (mountains) that are sacred to us the most because this is where we are confined to live for the rest of our lives--to raise our children, our grandchildren."[23]

Recognizing the tremendous cultural significance of the Little Rockies, why has the popularity of Assiniboine and Gros Ventre spirituality developed at the precise moment when the very environment from which such values derive is in jeopardy? This essay is an attempt to

understand why this process is now taking place. It is also an attempt to discern the continuities and discontinuities between past and present in relation to Native American environmentalism.

Despite the popular emergence of the Native American as the symbol of the modern EuroAmerican environmental movement, very little attention has been given to the role of Indians as environmental activists. An examination of dynamic historical contexts that have influenced, and continue to inspire, this form of political expression, or of the significance of cultural renewal in these efforts, has largely been ignored. Consequently, our understanding of Native American "ecologists" remains limited to superficial images, rather than engaged with active participants in contemporary political dialogues and cultural revitalization efforts. My purpose is to address this oversight and thereby treat Native Americans as dynamic and vital protagonists in a movement in which they have been relegated to a symbolic role for the past twenty years.

Environmental activism is an increasingly popular vehicle through which Indians can simultaneously communicate their religious and political aspirations. As the political expression of spiritual values, environmentalism is a survival mechanism for tribal cultures. It is a way of preserving their distinct social relationships and belief systems. It is also a means of resisting the ongoing process of invasion, conquest, and loss of identity experienced on contemporary reservations.[24] Indian environmental agendas do not develop within contextual vacuums. They are necessarily responsive to, and conditioned by, opposing white and/or Native American intentions which, for reasons of their own, seek to alter traditional cultural environments like the Little Rocky Mountains. As Stephen Cornell has observed, "groups act not only within limits set by

forces beyond their control, including their own distinctive histories. They also act upon those limits. In the process they may remake both themselves and the world in which they live, and thereby the conditions under which they act."[25]

II

The closing decades of the nineteenth century represent a period of extreme cultural tension among the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine peoples. In an effort to reduce this stress, each tribe adopted significant changes in their perceptions of, and relationships to, its natural environment. In particular, native sacred understandings of the Little Rockies region experienced substantial revisions during this era. This time of dramatic transition signifies a turning point in the development of both tribal cultures--a period that initiated a century-long process of cultural adaptation and loss that has only recently been revitalized. While several scholars, notably Edward Barry, Michael Foley, Loretta Fowler, and Michael Massie, have traced and analyzed the development of these dramatic events, a brief synopsis will provide the necessary background for understanding the contemporary significance of cultural revitalization and environmental activism on the Fort Belknap reservation.

Between 1855 and 1887, the area containing the Little Rocky Mountains and what is now the Fort Belknap reservation was embodied in the Great Blackfeet Reservation (see map). This 22 million acre parcel of land--extending from the continental divide to the eastern boundary of Montana territory, south to the Missouri River and north to the Canadian border--was shared in common by the Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, and River Crow. As late as 1879, Fort Belknap Agent W. L. Lincoln noted the absence of what he considered to be progressive influences on the native inhabitants of theregion. "These Indians in their habits," he reported, "are perhaps as wild as any Indians that exist. They have only been in contact with whites to a limited extent...and they have but little conception of civilized life..."[26] In less than fifteen years, however,

the traditional ways of life of these "uncivilized" Indians were irrevocably transformed in efforts to accommodate the EuroAmerican expansionism.

Perceiving the tremendous economic potential of the area, expansionists soon demanded that the Indians be confined on smaller reservations, so that the remainder of the fruitful region could be thrown open for white settlement. Trespassers ventured into the vigorously guarded territory of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre in search of gold as early as 1864, and despite native protests, were not severely hindered in their fevered quest for the precious metal.[27] In an attempt to establish their legitimate presence on the Great Blackfeet Reservation, Pike Landusky and Dutch "Louie" Meyers announced their discovery of gold in the Little Rocky Mountains in 1884. More than two thousand miners immediately flooded the area, establishing a mining district and electing a recorder to register their claims.[28]

During that same year, the great northern bison herd was rendered extinct, and the apparent independence of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine suddenly ended. In the severe winter of 1884, many tribal members starved or froze to death because they lacked compensation for the food, clothing, and shelter once provided by the buffalo. These adverse living conditions, coupled with the presence of miners in the Little Rockies, compelled the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre to abandon their traditional camps in favor of moving closer to the agency headquarters, where federal rations were distributed.[29]

The depletion of the buffalo and the discovery of gold in the Little Rockies justified the reduction of the Great Blackfeet Reservation in the minds of whites and Indians alike. Now that the Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, and River Crows' means of physical subsistence--the

buffalo--was eliminated, so too was the necessity to remain nomadic in a territory larger than all of New England. Increased native dependency and the presence of apparently permanent mining operations in the Little Rockies persuaded the tribes to accept their changing relationships with their natural environment and the encroaching whites. In 1886, for example, when a Jesuit priest named Father Francis Eberschweiler approached the Gros Ventre and asked them where he could find a place to establish a holy place, they suggested a location in the Little Rockies, "where for years the Gros Ventre had celebrated their religious ceremonies."[30] The Gros Ventre and Assiniboine accommodated themselves to the dominant agenda of the United States "just to get along," according to John Capture, "but they never did relinquish their old beliefs."[31]

In separate agreements with the Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Gros Ventre and River Crow, the Northwest Indian Commission negotiated the surrender of nearly 17,500,000 acres in January of 1887.[32] Three smaller reservations--Fort Peck, the Blackfeet, and Fort Belknap--were carved from the Great Blackfeet Reservation and the remainder of the region was released to white developers, who pressed for Montana's entrance into the union. The Gros Ventre and Assiniboine were provided with $115,000 in annual annuities over a period of ten years in exchange for a vastly diminished living environment encompassing some 840,000 acres.[33] While the Fort Belknap Reservation represented only a small fraction of their original land holdings, the promise of governmental assistance and the fact that the Little Rockies were included in the bargain proved persuasive to natives on the verge of starvation. Gradually, the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre accepted their confinement on the newly established Fort Belknap Reservation.

The agreement also gave official sanction to the presence of

Christianity in the Little Rockies, granting Eberschweiler a permanent 160 acre site and providing government subsidies for the establishment of a boarding school. Ursuline nuns arrived a year later to serve as the educators of the Indians and soon opened their classrooms. For the first time, the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine were presented with an alternative to their "natural college" in the Little Rockies.[34]

As it became increasingly evident that the mineral resources in the region were far more substantial than originally estimated, whites and Indians struggled to take advantage of the situation. The mountains soon attracted the attention of Copper King William A. Clark, who petitioned Congress for the opening and sale of the Little Rockies.[35] Thomas O'Hanlon, a former agency trader now dabbling in local mining developments, was also enthusiastic about the economic potential of the region. His correspondence with James J. Hill, the owner of the Great Northern Railroad, is illustrative of the national and local economic interests converging upon the Little Rockies. In 1892-93, O'Hanlon shipped "several carloads of ore" from the Fort Belknap mountains, and in December of 1893 he was pleased to inform Hill that the mine was getting richer--returns were $40,000 for the first nine months of 1894.[36]

In September of that year, however, the newly appointed agent on Fort Belknap Major Joseph M. Kelley suddenly "ejected" O'Hanlon and his associates at the request of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventres, who vehemently objected to the presence of outsiders on their reservation. Supporting the interests of the tribes under his authority, Kelley charged that miners were "clandestinely marking out mining claims" all over the mountains, "regardless of reservation rights and the laws of the United States."[37] Openly resisting the attempts to "segregate the most valuable part of this reservation back to the public domain," Kelley outlined the

reasons he supported the tribal members of Fort Belknap concerning the illegal exploitation of the Little Rockies:[38]

> During a recent visit of an Indian inspector here, this matter was thoroughly gone over with the headmen of both tribes, and they unanimously agreed not to consider the diminishing of their present holdings here under any circumstances. They claim that under the treaty made by them January 1, 1887, that they were given every assurance and promise that the lands they were about to take as their reserve should be their permanent homes; that the consummation of this treaty by the government was a guaranty that they and their posterity should never be disturbed in the enjoyment of these mountains and valleys. In my judgment the wishes of the Indians in this matter should prevail. It will only remain for the lapse of three years before the expiration of the present treaty stipulations. By that time there will not be enough timber on the (Milk) river to warm a single cabin, and they necessarily have to look to their mountains for fuel. They claim they are now making strenuous efforts to become self-supporting, and that the taking away of their mountains will deprive them of the principal means to obtain this end. They also claim, and with a certain degree of assurance, that their children are now learning aptly the various trades of the whites, and at the proper time their posterity can work these mines to the best tribal advantage.[39]

What is particularly interesting about Kelley's report, is the extent to which it reveals the dramatic transition in Gros Ventre's and Assiniboine's relationship to their natural environment. Only seven years after the passage of the Dawes Act, and long before allotment came to Fort Belknap in 1924, Kelley's tribes had begun to perceive the Little Rockies, not only as a means of subsistence, but as a means of profit as well.

Unfortunately for the Fort Belknap tribes, Kelley's actions eventually led to the second land reduction in the region in less than a decade. Challenged by the audacity of the agent and his native wards, James J. Hill promised "to do anything in (his) power to bring about the proposed cession of lands by the Indians" and vowed to "take the matter up personally with the Secretary of the Interior at the first opportunity."[40] A few months later, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs invited a

delegation of tribal elders from Fort Belknap to Washington, D.C. to discuss their staunch opposition to mining in the Little Rockies.[41]

Apparently, some of the tribal envoys left the nation's capitol with a decidedly different outlook, because negotiations for the Little Rockies land cession began in October of 1895. However, when commissioners William Pollock, George Bird Grinnell, and Walter Clements arrived in late September, the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine were, despite their impoverished conditions and the influence of the delegates, still not eager sell. This opinion was no doubt in part influenced by the fact that many of the same male adults who now considered the cession of the Little Rockies had, less than a decade earlier, seen their lands shrink substantially. The commissioners were aggressive in their bargaining, however, insisting that the Indians would starve if some agreement could not be made. Grinnell's initial negotiating statement exacerbated the stressful circumstances experienced by the Fort Belknap tribes and is illustrative of the coercive tactics utilized by the governmental delegation.

> I see that some of you people are pretty blind, you can't see far. You see the things that are close to your face, but the things that are further off you can't see all...You think that because for seven or eight years you have had plenty to eat and have lived well. . .that it will always go on like that. That is not true; it is not going to last. I go about among different people and see . . .how they are fixed. . .I don't see anybody as poor as you people. Two years from now, if you don't make an agreement with the government, you will just have to kill your cattle and then you will have to starve...The only thing you have to sell is this little piece of land that you do not use. I should like to see you sell that, because if you don't, I cannot tell how after two years have gone by you are going to live.[42]

After a two-day period of forceful bargaining, a majority of Indians--mostly Assiniboine--agreed to sell that portion of the Little Rockies already tainted by the effects of thirty-one years of mining. But

members of both tribes repeatedly stated that they were not willing to sell other resources, indicating their desire to utilize and develop these resources for themselves. A statement by Bad Dog, an Assiniboine, was illustrative of the manner in which a majority of Fort Belknap's Indians sought to accommodate the whites and, yet, still retain the capacity to carry out other economic developments in the mountains. "I am a Indian, but I think myself to be a white man. You ask for that mine, and I am willing to give it, but I don't want you to touch any of the rocks, or grass, or water--that is what I depend upon. I want cattle. I mean everything that I say."[43]

Grinnell and Pollock were ultimately successful in convincing the Indians to sell a parcel of land seven miles long and four miles wide, for $350,000. This seemingly insignificant piece of the Little Rockies was a steal for the United States government. Within ten years, the Zortman-Landusky mines became the largest gold producers in the state of Montana. The district maintained that distinction until 1936, when a devastating forest fire ended the first major period of gold mining in the Little Rockies for all practical purposes.

Today the Zortman-Landusky mine is the largest low grade cyanide heap leach gold mining operation in the western world.[44] Since its resumption of mining along the reservation border in 1979, Zortman Mining, Inc., a subsidiary of Pegasus Gold Corporation of Vancouver British Columbia, has reaped $300 million in gross gold values, and net profits of $18 million, according to company officials.[45] The district has recorded a production of 1,250,000 ounces of gold, with approximately two-thirds of that production occurring during the 1979-1990 period.[46] In 1991 alone, the Little Rockies mines harvested an additional 109,700 ounces of gold and 652,000 ounces of silver.[47] The combined total disturbed area at the

Zortman and Landusky mines is 1,260 acres, according to government figures.[48] Jim Geyer, general manager of the mining company has reported that of the 200 full-time and 15-20 part-time jobs offered by the company, fifteen percent are held by Native Americans.[49]

Recognizing the enormous wealth generated by the Zortman- Landusky mines and the relatively minor economic benefit they provide for the people of Fort Belknap, it is easy to see why the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre continue to resent the losses they have suffered from the 1895-6 land cession of the Little Rockies. Bureau of Indian Affairs natural resource officer Greg Smitman has speculated that if the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre had developed their gold and silver reserves themselves, as they had hoped to do in 1894, they could well have been the richest Indians living in North America today.[50]

As it now stands, however, poverty is the dominant feature characterizing Fort Belknap--a condition which supersedes the differences between tribes, and promotes a common identity based on shared experience. Recent studies have revealed that "Fort Belknap is the poorest of Montana's seven Indian reservations, being 'virtually underdeveloped in every respect.'"[51] Unemployment rates exceed 70 percent, and levels of alcoholism are as astonishingly high.[52]

III

The extermination of the buffalo, the discovery of gold in the Little Rockies, and the reduction of Assiniboine and Gros Ventre territory went hand in hand with newly established education and religious conversion efforts on the reservation. Together these circumstances created the conditions under which an intensely aggressive federal assimilation policy was formulated and promoted. Benjamin Harrison's 1889 appointment of Thomas J. Morgan as the new Commissioner of Indian Affairs symbolized a new era in Indian/white relations on the northern plains. In his first Annual Report of October 1889, Morgan indicated the extent to which tribes, such as those living on Fort Belknap, were expected to embrace EuroAmerican beliefs and practices. "The Indians," he insisted, "must conform to the 'white man's way'... or be crushed by it."[53] Seeking local agents who actively supported the policy of his administration, Morgan appointed Archer O. Simons as the first agent of the newly established Fort Belknap reservation.

Simons vigorously pursued Morgan's objectives, but initially had some difficulty in achieving the compliance of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre. In his first report to Morgan, the agent observed that "with the extinction of the game, the barbarous dances and annual feasts and celebrations. . . received a check" on Fort Belknap. Nonetheless, he admitted that older tribal members were "fast wedded to their ignorant prejudices," practicing native "habits and customs which interfere with the acquirement of civilized usages by the children and retard(ed) their advancement in education."[55] He also noted that "a portion of the young men" still engaged in traditional pastimes that, in his assessment, were "calculated to revive memories of the savage past."[56]

In hopes of combating what he considered to be a reversion into paganism, Simons advocated the construction of a government boarding school to assist the Jesuits in removing the Indian children from the "debasing influences and habits of the wigwam."[57] As experiences on other reservations had shown, isolating Indian children from their families effectively decentralized the tribal community by limiting the transference of language and custom from the older generation to the younger.

The implementation of this policy was difficult for reservation officials and extremely traumatic for Indian families. Juanita Tucker, who began attending the Fort Belknap Boarding School in 1901, described the manner in which children were compelled to go to school at five years of age. "The little ones, I saw them clinging to their mothers' necks and they were just crying. They didn't want to leave home. The police went after them to go to school. I have seen the police just pull kids away from their mother's arms."[58] The determination of both students and administrators also is recalled by Theresa Lame Bull, an eighty-five year old Gros Ventre who attended St. Paul's mission in the early 1900s. She described "a high fence, about ten feet of boards," that surrounded her dormitory. Topped with barbed wire, the fence was designed to prevent children from attempting to "get out and run away" from the boarding school. Confined like a prisoner, Lame Bull regretfully added, "we couldn't get over there."[59] The Fort Belknap Agency offered economic incentives, such as "loans, wage work, and a ready market for wood, grain, and other crops" to parents who would send Assiniboine and Gros Ventre children to boarding schools.[60] In addition, young men who supported the educational program on Fort Belknap also stood a chance of obtaining "wives among the young female pupils under the priests supervision."[61]

Through these coercive methods Simons and his successors successfully increased Indian enrollment in government or mission boarding schools. Soon, the agent cited with approval the "utter suppression of the Indian tongue" on his reservation.[62] Lame Bull remembered strict Ursuline nuns who rigorously instilled the practice of speaking English at the expense of the native language. "We couldn't speak our language," she lamented, "they would punish us if we did. And that's how we lost our language."[63] Just four years after their establishment, Simons calculated that 400 children between the ages of six and sixteen attended reservation boarding schools.[64] That same year the agent noted a "marked improvement" in those children who had been "removed from the bad influences of the Indian camp."[65]

In identifying the various factors contributing to the transformation and decline of aboriginal culture in the Little Rockies region, the educational system was perhaps the most influential. Boarding schools introduced an alien culture to those most impressionable to outside influences. Education formulated two separate worlds in the minds of children and thereby eliminated the confusion caused by intermingling the white world view with the traditional. As David Rodnick observed in his study of Assiniboine culture on Fort Belknap, "aboriginal patterns held by the child were so ridiculed that children soon adopted the white contempt for these and, when the child had finished schooling, found an alienness in those patterns that divorced him from the culture of his parents."[66]

The boarding school experience, in other words, amounted to an externally imposed generation gap that drove a wedge between parents and children with regard to the perpetuation of traditional culture, and particularly its religious manifestations. Clark Wissler, for example,

noted in 1912 that while the Gros Ventre were known to possess several sacred pipe bundles, virtually all of them had been "buried with their last owners," rather than being passed on with their accompanying ritual knowledge, as had been the custom in earlier times.[67] During the influenza epidemic of 1918, a time in which Juanita Tucker remembered that "the Indians died like flies," many remaining elders who possessed knowledge of native doctoring, sacred songs or religious protocols died without revealing their knowledge to their Christianized children.[68]

Others, like Coming Daylight, refused to accept such knowledge because in her words, "my children were all Catholics and I joined the Church and I will be a good Catholic until I die."[69] Al Chandler would not accept knowledge of his adopted father's curing power, in part, because "the Catholics didn't want you to do such things."[70] Similarly, Garter Snake claimed that she used to bring offerings to the feathered pipe, but she "stopped doing this" after she "joined the Catholic Church." "But even now," she lamented, "I feel 'it's all alone. I pity it."[71] Eventually, a lack of knowledge concerning traditional religious matters resulted in disagreements over the required qualifications for ritual authority and the necessary procedures of sacred ceremonies.

For these reasons, sacred expressions of traditional culture steadily decreased until the 1980s. George Horse Capture described this period of tremendous cultural loss in this manner: "Many of our parents and grandparents shied away from passing Indian traditions on, and as a result there is a big void. I guess we were still trying to assimilate and got caught up in their Christianity, which in spite of their devotion in trying to convert us to what they thought was right, they did us incredible damage because we are not them."[72]

The work of several ethnologists confirms the adverse effect of these circumstances on the popularity of native religious ritual practices. In 1938, Rodnick observed that "no medicine man or shaman has existed on the reservation for the past ten years," and added that with a few exceptions "no other ceremonial parts of the aboriginal culture remain."[73] Rodnick's informant, Simon Firstshoot, noted that in 1938 "just forty-four Assiniboine" carried on the old way of life, asserting that "up until 1918, all of the old people were living and quite a bit of the old way of life was continuing."[74] After this time, however, Indians educated in white schools, "the majority" of whom were "Catholics," quickly replaced the older generation.[75] While Rodnick also noted that "the church-going habit" was far more evident among the Gros Ventre, who tended to settle in closer proximity to St. Paul's mission, he nonetheless maintained that no Assiniboine felt "that death has been properly sanctified without the presence of a priest, or minister at the cemetery."[76]

This process of religious transformation on Fort Belknap is eloquently conveyed in the observations of John Cooper. His study of the Gros Ventre noted that in the buffalo days hunters would select choice pieces of buffalo meat to give as offerings to the sacred flat pipe bundle. Offerings at the time of his work in the 1950s, however, were given in the form of dollars to the shrine of Our Lady of the Little Rockies on the grounds of St. Paul's Mission.[77] Cooper's study also relates the story of The Boy, a Catholic Gros Ventre who, prior to World War II, desired to assume the keepership of one of two remaining sacred pipes--the Flat Pipe. He could only get the consent of his wife on the condition that the pipe remained "a keepsake, not to pray as it used to be prayed to."[78] This lack of ceremonial reverence was possible in The Boy's

mind because respect originally afforded to the pipe keepers and their families had been replaced by respect "for the priests and nuns."[79]

A few years later Verne Dusenberry documented the continuing legacy of the assimilation policy upon Fort Belknap's Native Americans. During his field work on the reservation he observed that both the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboine

> seem to have lost most of their aboriginal culture--more in fact than one finds on other reservations today. Both tribes speak English almost to the exclusion of their own tongue; the young people know nothing of the language and seem to care but little for the old ways of life.[80]

In another 1966 study he noted that the tribes had "forgotten how to make a (sweat) lodge and know nothing of its purpose or significance."[81]

What is important to realize, however, is that the assimilation policy on Fort Belknap did not completely erase traditional native expressions of cultural heritage. In large measure, only those cultural components of a decidedly sacred character were restricted, and ultimately ceased to be practiced on the reservation. As early as 1886 Agent Lincoln took measures to limit the influence of the "medicine man" and banned the Sun Dance on the reservation, but he made "no objection to the other dances, as they only follow the same path as their white brethren do."[82] Lorretta Fowler has recently argued that once becoming "a good Catholic" became a means of obtaining prestige in the 1890s, tribal religious ceremonies were replaced by secular rituals such as naming ceremonies, social dances and games, and giveaways.[83]

Perceived as harmless by reservation officials, less controversial, secular expressions of native culture have remained exceedingly popular throughout the twentieth century. Non-religious celebrations reinforced Native American solidarity, provided an opportunity for individual

recognition, and became the heart of a contemporary tribal identity that has persisted to this day.[84] Although the Sun Dance was occasionally held in the twentieth century, Lincoln's successors generally continued his policy. Thus, a native desire to perpetuate secular elements of their culture, coupled with the support of white authorities, inspired continued public participation in non-religious events such as the Grass Dance, the Christmas Dance, the Hays Fair, and the inter-tribal pow wow. In this manner, the tribes of Fort Belknap "accommodated themselves to changes, such as the disappearance of native religious organization" without relinquishing a distinctive "world view and style of interaction."[85]

Aside from a tremendous loss in ritualistic knowledge and participation on Fort Belknap, what were the associated results of the transformation from two separate tribal cultures with distinct sacred and secular elements to more generic reservation identity based on secular expressions alone? At least three significant social consequences can be identified: first, a general decline in the ability of Assiniboines and Gros Ventres to reach a political consensus; second, a marked loss of self-esteem as evidenced by drug and alcohol abuse; and third, an increasingly pronounced religious and cultural dissatisfaction among members of both tribes. As will be shown, these interrelated factors, combined with the perceived presence of an ecological crisis in the Little Rocky Mountains, have led to a recent revival in the practice of sacred rituals on the Fort Belknap reservation.

As Wilcomb Washburn has argued, "no fine line was drawn between political and religious activities" of most Native Americans.[86] Religious leaders were commonly political leaders as well, especially in Plains Indian societies. Authority was not generally divided into specific realms of influence. As John Capture noted, persons of renowned spiritual and

military prestige "were accepted as leaders of the encampment and tribe and whenever they wanted to decide something they basically did so through consensus--not a majority vote."[87]

Thus, when a Gros Ventre or Assiniboine put aside their native religious affiliations, they also tended to relinquish any political authority they might have possessed. Fowler has observed, for instance, that once the centralized religious leadership of the Gros Ventre deteriorated, the tribe "had difficulty in mobilizing political consensus."[88] The land cession of 1895-96, in which approximately twenty-one square miles of the Little Rockies were transferred to the public domain and opened for mining, is symbolic of this breakdown in authority. During the October tribal negotiations, Fowler notes that "religious leaders had little ability to introduce unanimity" among their followers.[89] Sleeping Bear, a Gros Ventre who participated in the negotiations expressed the native confusion during the proceedings, stating "these Indians are all talking different."[90] While 5/6 of the Assiniboine voted in favor of the cession, only 1/4 of the Gros Ventre did.[91]

This disagreement is especially noteworthy when one considers the relative unanimity of similar decisions less than a decade earlier. Agent Lincoln maintained in 1886, a year prior to the reduction of the Great Blackfeet reservation, that "the Indians here appear to be pretty unanimous in desiring that the Government purchase a portion of their lands."[92] A similar consensus was expressed in 1894, when the leaders of both tribes were unanimous in their decision not to sell the Little Rockies.[93]

In short, the 1895 cession of the Little Rockies was the first major instance in which evidence of a breakdown in tribal religious and

political authorities can be documented on Fort Belknap. As the transcripts from the negotiation proceedings reveal, most of the elders were sympathetic to the notion of selling the land to the United States, while many of the younger tribal members desired to retain the Little Rockies for their own economic development.[94] Many in both factions, however, seemed to have accepted the relinquishment of their traditional associations with Fort Belknap's mountains. No one mentioned the sacred nature of the Little Rockies as a reason not to sell.

The sale of the Little Rockies was followed by a "gradual withdrawal" of elders from their participation in political affairs, and was "coterminous with a general decline in tribal members' participation in native religious ritual."[95] In the early 1900s, as tribal members shifted to the expression of native secular rituals only, neither the Assiniboine nor Gros Ventre presented a united political resistance to the dominant white culture impressed upon them. Rather, the majority of those enrolled on Fort Belknap seem to have accepted the importation of alien elements into their world-view in an attempt to establish a more satisfying culture. This "vitalistic movement," although undeniably motivated by stressful conditions, seems to have been consciously embraced by the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre.

Although it is difficult to quantitatively document, it can be argued that a lack of native religious and political direction has substantially contributed to a pervasive loss of tribal and individual self-esteem. Charlie Ereaux asserted that because of the "hopelessness and impoverishment" on Fort Belknap, "the people had lost their sense of pride."[96] Economic and cultural deprivation fostered a decline into substance abuse which, as we shall see, is only now beginning to turn around.

Simultaneous with tribal declines in their capacity for political resistance and a general loss in self-respect and identity, is a growing dissatisfaction with Catholicism. Jeannette Warrior, a Gros Ventre elder and Church member, observed "boy, there's a lot of our people kind of talking up...against the Catholics, and they blame a lot of us."[97] Elmer Main confirms Warrior's sense of the situation in maintaining that some individuals are "discouraged with the white man religion," and are seeking more satisfying alternatives. The Gros Ventre elder went on to describe their discontented response stating, these natives "decided 'we'll start our own religion called the Indian religion," and eventually began holding "spiritual gatherings in a natural setting."[98] George Horse Capture adamantly contends that "the time of conversion and Christianity and manifest destiny--that's all over. And its been proven to us that it doesn't work."[99]

In the last decade, the expression of traditional Assiniboine and Gros Ventre cultural values on the Fort Belknap reservation has become increasingly pronounced. Loretta Fowler, who arrived on Fort Belknap in 1979, observed the early stages of this cultural revival. Her work, Shared symbols, Contested Meanings, records the contemporary accounts of individuals who recently had started fasting on the tops of buttes in the Little Rocky Mountains and in ritualistic sweat lodge ceremonies.[100] She also noticed that "youths were participating in Sun Dances on neighboring reservations," such as Rocky Boy to the west and Fort Peck to the east.[101]

Despite these beginnings, Fowler saw the persistence of several secular rituals, like the inter-tribal powwow, giveaways, and naming ceremonies, as the cultural foundation of a tribal community, brought together by a common cultural heritage and experience. She describes the perpetuation of secular culture as part of a on-going process of adaptation in which the people of Fort Belknap came to "deal with change on their own terms" by "reorganizing their ritual life and the relationship of these changes to new forms of political and economic organization."[102]

Despite the originality and enduring value of her research, Fowler's thesis that the secular is the dominant expression of traditional tribal culture on Fort Belknap is in need of substantial revision. Her work does not address the cultural significance of recent mining developments in the Little Rockies. Moreover, since 1985, when the Sun Dance was reinstituted on the reservation, there has been a dramatic resurgence in the practice and acceptance of native religious rituals among the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine. Combined with the still persistent non-religious elements,

this recent transformation signifies a new era in the cultural development of Fort Belknap's people--an era in which the sacred has again been combined with the secular in the formation of an increasingly unified and balanced state of cultural well-being.

Virgil McConnell, an Assiniboine elder, compared this period of transition to the state of things during his childhood.

> In my sixty-six years I've seen a lot of changes in our people. For a while we lost everything. We didn't have anything to bring us together. . .It's changing now. Our people are coming back to the culture and the religious beliefs. . .And we don't go out and recruit them. They're the ones who come and do these things themselves. They come and they want to learn different things about their culture and their religion, such as the hand game, the sweat lodge, the Sun Dances, the Spirit Lodges. This is the Indian way of believing.[103]

Rhonda Snell echoes McConnell's viewpoint in describing the increasing popularity of native sacred rituals. When she first "started going back" to the native religion, she remembers that "there was maybe ten people at the most that would come." Times have changed. "Now we don't have enough chairs or a sweat lodge big enough for people to get into it. You got to go in one, maybe two rounds, and then let somebody else come in so that they can get what they want to get out of there."[104] Or as Loren Lewis, another Assiniboine put it, "we all began to wake up...It was drawing us back."[105]

Along with the practice of their respective religious traditions, the study of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine languages and native forms of doctoring have also become increasingly popular in recent years. As Theresa Lame Bull noted in 1985 she was teaching the Gros Ventre language at the Hays High School but her students "didn't care to learn anything like that." Now, she says, "they got it down at the [tribal] college" and "they doing good."[106] Loren Lewis, sees "more and more people wanting" to

learn Assiniboine, in Lodgepole, where he teaches it.[107] Lewis adds that "with these Indian ways being renewed, more and more people are turning to the Indian medicines" that grow in the Little Rockies.[108]

All of the informants whom the author interviewed on Fort Belknap readily recognized a revival in traditional Native American spiritualism on Fort Belknap, and that the cultural character of the reservation had undergone a dramatic revitalization in the last decade. Several factors have helped to inspire the recent return to the practice of native religious rituals on Fort Belknap. First, an educational opportunity for those natives born in the 1950s has helped to encourage a renewed interest in the non-secular traditions of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre, and simultaneously inspired a general feeling of resentment toward, and dissatisfaction with, Christianity. Second, the evolution of anti-Christian sentiments on Fort Belknap has brought about greater support for native traditions by the Catholic Church in an effort to hold on to members. Third, this development has only validated the participation of dissatisfied natives in tribal religious rituals, and helped to evoke the support of Catholic Assiniboine and Gros Ventre elders who previously had condemned the younger generation for their revival efforts. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, a perceived environmental crisis in the Little Rocky Mountains has provided a focal point that has inspired an increased reliance on traditional religious and political affiliations.

Federal programs starting in the 1960s provided natives with unprecedented opportunities to receive a college education. Such programs have had a substantial effect in renewing the interest of tribal members in their own religious traditions, and in the words of John Capture, have made it possible for those so inclined "to analyze the difference between

their culture and the culture of the dominant society."[109] With higher education, and the corresponding Red Power movement, a generation of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine came to de-emphasize the Christian inclinations of their parents in favor of their own interpretations of native religious traditions. As Oliver Archdale put it "They're finding themselves. Our people are becoming educated. And the path that our people once had, that's the path that our people are going back to, because that's the path that was given to us by the Creator."[110]

Capture likened his people's experiences to that of a prisoner of war, who "lives according to the dictates of his captures until some day when he can be free."[111] In his view, Native Americans did not "completely submit" themselves to whites because they knew that someday they were "going to get out" and "gain the knowledge to reinvent [their] way of life." Cultural revitalization is "done through education," according to Capture.[112] "They wanted to practice [religious persecution] on the Indians, and all the Indian did was not resist it. Just said 'O.K. I'll go to your church, but there'll be a day when I learn what the truth is.' That's what they're doing now."[113] George Horse Capture, who attended college in the 1960s, studied his own people because "we were assimilating out." Through an educational process, many Native Americans "got a direction--a sense of pride." Most of that generation, he went on, "stuck with Indian things, and maybe some of us became examples for the younger ones during these revival times."[114]

Because so much of the traditional way of life was intentionally or otherwise altered, however, modifications had to be made and knowledge from other tribes had to be borrowed. Buffalo tongues, for instance, could no longer be used in the Sun Dance ceremony, as they once had been, because they were simply not available. "Nowadays its a far cry from those

requirements," Capture said, "but they try to imitate what they used to do."[115] Similarly, Wilfred Warrior described the renewed interest in fasting in the Little Rockies as a combination of faith and experimentation. "Some of them go up and they do like they think it should be done and others go up and just try to find out, I guess," he said. Warrior also described one of the manners in which religious knowledge is reconstructed on Fort Belknap. "A lot of these ideas that are being used right now," he asserted, "these guys come out of Canada with that...they went and learned a whole lot about it. There's a whole lot of Indian spiritualism up there in Canada--always has been."[116] Loren Lewis described a pilgrimage to visit the Canadian Cree that he and two others made in quest of such knowledge.

At the time of her research in the early 1980s, Lorretta Fowler discovered that the elders were skeptical of those few individuals who were returning to the native religion. In her words, "the youths who fast on a high butte are 'phonies' in the eyes of elders because they have borrowed extensively from other tribes, and have sought out medicine men of other tribes as mentors and instructors."[117] Jeannette Warrior, Wilfred's mother, expressed concern over such practices, maintaining that "these young guys took it up and...these old people don't think they're doing it right...because they don't know the real way. When these old-timers died they took it with them."[118]

Elmer Main helped explain the basis for Warrior's trepidation. The elders of today "regard the Sun Dance as a sacred event that should not be tampered with." Prior to the recent revival, the last Sun Dance was held on Fort Belknap in 1936, and it was shortly after that time that "the mountains burned down." Although no one knew who started the great fire of '36, "some individuals... said they never should have had that Sun

Dance because they did it wrong." Consequently, "they never had one until just more recently."[119]

Despite Warrior's concern that sacred ceremonies might be done improperly, she admitted that "now its getting better" because "they got a lot of followers."[120] Among the supporters of the recent revival, members of the Catholic Church are perhaps the most notable. Rhonda Snell described the Church's change in perspective this way. "It wasn't too long ago that you were a devil worshiper and you were going to burn in hell for what you believed," she said. "It's different today. There's been fathers and sisters...to our sweats and Sun Dances, and I've yet to hear one of them saying something bad about our religion. And that's just happened in the last five or ten years."[121] Theresa Lame Bull told a story of a priest who recently tried to fast in the Little Rockies but was "chased down" by "spirits."[122] Local churches have "even burned sweetgrass" according to Dora Helgeson. "They're accepting us now," she says. "They're not saying you're doing wrong, you know...They're integrating some of the Indian religion into their church. That makes us feel good."[123]

The fact that Christian churches, and especially the Catholics, are now supporting native religious expressions is another significant reason why the cultural revitalization efforts on Fort Belknap has moved beyond the expression of merely secular values. The recent participation of Church officials in sacred tribal rituals is no doubt in part a response to the younger Assiniboines and Gros Ventres' dissatisfaction with Christianity. By taking part in the revival and attempting to incorporate native symbols into Christian ceremonies, the Church hopes to win back the loyalty and conviction of its estranged tribal members. What seems to be happening on Fort Belknap, however, is the exact opposite. Catholic

support of Assiniboine and Gros Ventre religious rituals has only confirmed the legitimacy of those practices in the minds of younger natives.

Moreover, Church acceptance of Indian spirituality has helped to encourage the support of Christianized tribal elders, who previously had refused to acknowledge the validity of native revitalization efforts on the reservation. Jeannette Warrior, despite her concerns that some ceremonies are done improperly, asserted "I think its good to keep the tradition up, you know. They shouldn't let it die down."[124] Dora Helgeson, gets "a feeling of peace" because the Sun Dance has returned. When asked how he felt about the return to native religious practices on Fort Belknap, Jim Stiffarm commented, "Its up to them. I'm a Catholic. I don't care what they do."[126] Theresa Lame Bull, an 85 year old Gros Ventre Catholic, is "glad" that individuals are returning to the Sun Dance and "to learn the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine language" now taught at the Fort Belknap Community College. "It makes me happy. I hope they keep it up...it's good," she maintained.[127] Elmer Main probably best summed up the perspective of the elders when he said, "some of us are still going to the Catholic church. Our generation is still loyal to God, but I call him the creator...To me there are two religions so I don't want to...commingle. There's two religions, but I still revere what those Indians are doing at the Sun Dance."[128]

Christian tolerance of traditional Assiniboine and Gros Ventre religious expression on Fort Belknap has changed drastically since the time when the elders attended boarding school at the mission. This difference of perspective is helping to erase the generational differences initiated with that educational experience. Older Catholics no longer feel that it is wrong to support, or at least tolerate native religion, and

these developments have laid the foundation for the establishment of a new tribal consensus based on commonly shared cultural values.

The perceived environmental crisis now occurring in the Little Rocky Mountains, coupled with the more deep-seated influences outlined above, has generated the stressful conditions inspiring the recent cultural revitalization movement on the Fort Belknap reservation. A current and pervasive dissatisfaction with the social, political, and religious climate of Fort Belknap, has combined with a popular reaction against modern cyanide heap leach gold mining developments in the Little Rockies, to create an intolerable level of cultural tension among the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre people.[129] The revival of traditional religious practices in the mountains of Fort Belknap is "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort" by tribal members "to construct a more satisfying culture."[130] Rumor and observation have combined to inspire a significant revitalization response to the situation now confronting the people of Fort Belknap. As Dora Helgeson put it, "we've heard a lot of stories, but they [the mining company] keep denying it...They got these big hoses there on top, and all that cyanide mixture is just spraying...like a lawn mower. They say that when the birds fly over it they just drop dead, the poison's so bad. There were stories about a couple of mountain goats falling dead after they drank that water. Then they're talking about animals loosing their hair...Stuff like that you hear...and that's what scares us too. What is it going to do to humans?"[131]

In addition to local rumors, there are the more obvious effects of the recent mining in the Little Rockies. In May of 1990, a temporary moratorium that had previously limited the construction of a new cyanide leach pad was lifted by the Bureau of Land Management.[132] And last year the mining company requested another 22,000 acre expansion for exploratory

drilling on BLM land, ceded in the 1895 Grinnell Agreement.[133] Wilfred Warrior observed that "there's a big difference between this mine and the one that they had at the turn of the century...When you approach the mountains from any direction you can see it. It's just a big ol' ugly scar up there. You know, they've taken some of these big hills, and that's what the people are concerned about...Nowadays it's just the people who work up there that are really benefiting, aside from the donations that the mining company gives to the church groups."[134] George Horse Capture echoes the concern voiced by Helgeson and Warrior arguing, "they call these mountains island mountains for a particular reason. They're very small. They're very finite. You start tearing these mountains down and pretty soon it's going to be flat and there's going to be no more mountains."[135]

The contemporary revitalization effort that still continues on Fort Belknap is, in part, a direct religious and political response to the perceived crisis in the Little Rockies. When Loren Lewis prays in the traditional manner, he directs his efforts toward the betterment of his people and the end to mining in the mountains. "When I fasted it was for good health, the cultural revival of our people, and also the closing of the mine. These mountains are our spirit. It is in all of us."[136] Virgil McConnell also confronts the crisis in the Little Rockies spiritually. "When I pray, I don't pray against the mining company. I don't pray that anything bad will happen to them. I pity them for the things that they do to other people and themselves. I pray that one day they'll come to their senses and say 'hey, we're hurting the people on this reservation. Let's just take our machinery and go leave them to their mountains.' Then we'll be able to go into our hills and fast, hold sun dances, and pray to the Great Spirit without interference from anything."[137]

Traditional Gros Ventre and Assiniboine religious expressions not

only provide Fort Belknap's residents with a means to cope with the stressful circumstances they face, but also provide a focal point for the social and political reunification of the reservation's native population. During the two annual Sun Dances held on the reservation "all these people come together to be one," according to McConnell. "You're not Assiniboine. You're not Gros Ventre. You're not Cree. You're not white. You're not colored...You're all one. You're brothers. You're sisters. This is how we pray."[138] Anthropologists Joseph Jorgensen and, more recently, Ben Medicine have argued that the Sun Dance is a means of empowering the powerless as well as a way of coping with social and economic deprivation. In their assessment, the Sun Dance not only repairs social relations, but also is a symbolic means of renewal.[139] Otto Cantrell, an Assiniboine Sun Dance maker, compared the ritual, also known as the medicine or sacrifice lodge, to the Crucifixion and the notion of Christian salvation. He explained that it is necessary to "sacrifice your body to receive the glory of God."[140] He went on to describe this ritual's capacity to renew the natural environment. "Last year I gave my blood to the mother earth," he said, "because I came from there and I'm going back there."[141] Like water to a plant, Cantrell's sacrifice symbolically restored the Great Spirit's creation.

In reviving their religious culture, the people of Fort Belknap are attempting to renew the earth and empower themselves by regaining the ability to achieve a political consensus. This reality was tested recently when a referendum was held in allowing mining developments on the reservation side of the Little Rockies. Despite the extremely adverse economic conditions on Fort Belknap, the measure was "overwhelmingly defeated," according to Wilfred Warrior.[142] "That other mining you didn't hear so much about it," maintained Wilfred's mother Jeanette. "But now

they're. . . fighting it and trying to prevent them from coming on this side. And they did stick together--they voted against it."[143]

Confronted with the possibility of another mining expansion following 1990, several tribal members formed Red Thunder, Inc., an organization dedicated to environmental and cultural preservation on Fort Belknap. Perceiving the relatedness between traditional culture and the Little Rockies environment, Red Thunder has combined the political and religious to form a unified cultural agenda. Since its establishment, Red Thunder and its legal associates have succeeded in forcing the mining company to file its first environmental impact statement since it reopened in 1979.[144] Due largely to Red Thunder's efforts, the tribal council recently requested that the Environmental Protection Agency add the King's Creek drainage, which flows into the reservation, to its national Superfund toxic waste clean up fund.[145] In August of last year, Red Thunder also organized a March for Survival on Fort Belknap, in which dozens of concerned individuals protested gold mining in the Little Rocky Mountains.[146]

Aside from promoting tribal unity and a popular political consensus, the recent revitalization movement on Fort Belknap has had a positive effect upon drug and alcohol abuse. "Its hard to measure," says Wilfred Warrior, "but certain individuals who have really been wild hands over the years...went into Indian spiritualism...and it really brings 'em out of it, and it helps them...So far the best success they've had with 'em is getting them into Indian spiritualism."[147] In speculating on why so many have become involved with the revitalization movement, George Horse Capture said, "we had feelings we couldn't get anywhere else. We had direction. We had pride."[148]

For some on Fort Belknap, the positive impact that the revival has

had upon tribal identity far outweighs the economic advantages of continued mining development. "The community has survived...an intolerance of racism and ethnocide," said Michelle Ereaux, "and the result of that has been the demise into alcoholism and substance abuse for many. The one workable way out of that, that sustains each of us here, is the traditional beliefs and practices, and these mountains are absolutely essential to that...Therefore, protecting these mountains as a whole carries a greater value than whatever jobs and all the money the mines might bring to corporate investors or the community in a short-sighted economic boom."[149]

Significant parallels between the two periods traced in this study can be identified. The late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries represent historical turning points in which one world-view is, in large measure, exchanged for a more satisfying alternative. In the earlier time, the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine sought prestige, success, and, ultimately, their very survival in their adaptation to white values and environmental perspectives. In the later period, the same goals are being reached through a revival in traditional values and environmental perspectives--a movement that has once again unified the sacred and secular aspirations of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine peoples. In each era, the Fort Belknap tribes made substantial revisions in their world-views--particularly as they related to the Little Rockies environment. Moreover, each revitalization movement was primarily instigated by the youth in both tribes. Gradually, however, other portions of the tribal populations came to embrace the goals of the revitalists. Finally, each revitalization effort was fundamentally motivated by the presence of intolerable cultural stress, in which the ongoing development of gold mining in the Little Rocky Mountains has played a primary role.

If we are to view Native Americans as protagonists in the making of their own history, then it is necessary to get beyond the stereotypical characterization of them as passive victims. As the example of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre shows, the Colombian legacy of conquest continues to shape the American West, but it is not a one-sided process of development. Native Americans continue to participate in a struggle and dialogue with the dominant white society in which conditions of change are presented and responded to mutually. This is not to say that extraneous

factors have not played a role in shaping this adaptive process, only that it is ultimately the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre who seek to overcome the difficult, and at times oppressive, conditions under which they continue to live. This struggle is "nothing personal," said Joe Azure as he looked out over the long, green foothills of the Little Rockies. "It's survival. We're asking for survival."

ENDNOTES

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[5]Ibid., 265.

[6]Ibid., 267.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]For an explanation of what is meant by essential values see Joseph Epes Brown, "The Persistence of Essential Values among North American Plains Indians," Studies in Comparative Religion 3:4 (Autumn, 1969): 216-225.

[10]Charles Ereaux, interview by author, 16 July 1991, Dodson, Montana, tape recording in possession of the author, Bozeman, Montana.

[11]See Donald Hughes, American Indian Ecology (El Paso: Western Press, 1983), 14.

[12]George Horse Capture, Jr., interview by author, 14 July 1991, Hays, Montana, tape recording in possession of the author, Bozeman, Montana.

[13]Virgil McConnell, interview by author, 30 July 1991, Mission Canyon, Little Rocky Mountains, tape recording in possession of the author, Bozeman, Montana.

[14]John Capture, interview by author, 19 July 1991, Hays, Montana, tape recording in possession of the author, Bozeman, Montana.

[15]See Deward E. Walker, Jr., "Protection of American Indian Sacred Geography," in The Handbook of American Indian Religious Freedom, ed. Christopher Vecsey (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 104.

[16](Helgeson 1991)

[17](Horse Capture Jr. 1991)

[18]Joe Azure and Robert Gopher, interviewed by the author, 28 July 1991, Big Warm Creek, Montana, tape recording in possession of the author, Bozeman, Montana.

[19](Virgil McConnell 1991)

[20]Theresa Lame Bull, interviewed by the author, 13 July 1991, Hays, Montana, Tape recording in possession of the author, Bozeman, Montana

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[27](U. S. Department of the Interior 1991, 109)

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[31](John Capture 1991)

[32]See Norris Hundley, Jr. in The Plains Indians of the Twentieth Century, Peter Iverson, ed., (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 80.

[33]Michael Foley, "An Historical Analysis of the Administration of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation by the United States," (Montana State University Special Collections, 1975), 89.

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