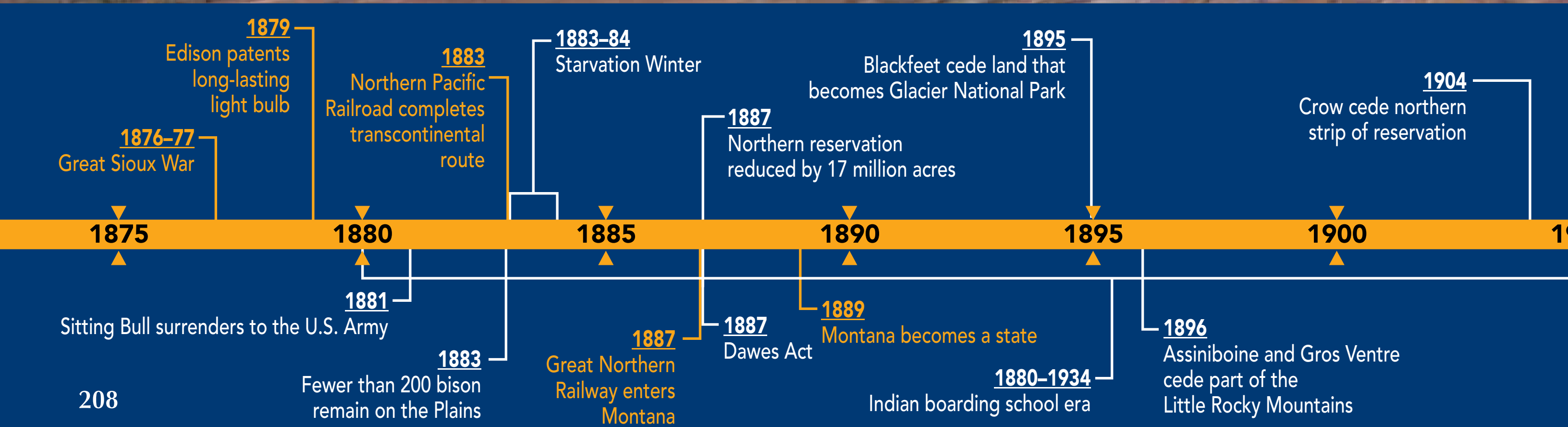
# 11 The Early Reservation Years

## 1880–1920

*FIGURE 11.1: Reservation Scene,* by William Standing, ca. 1930



## READ TO FIND OUT:

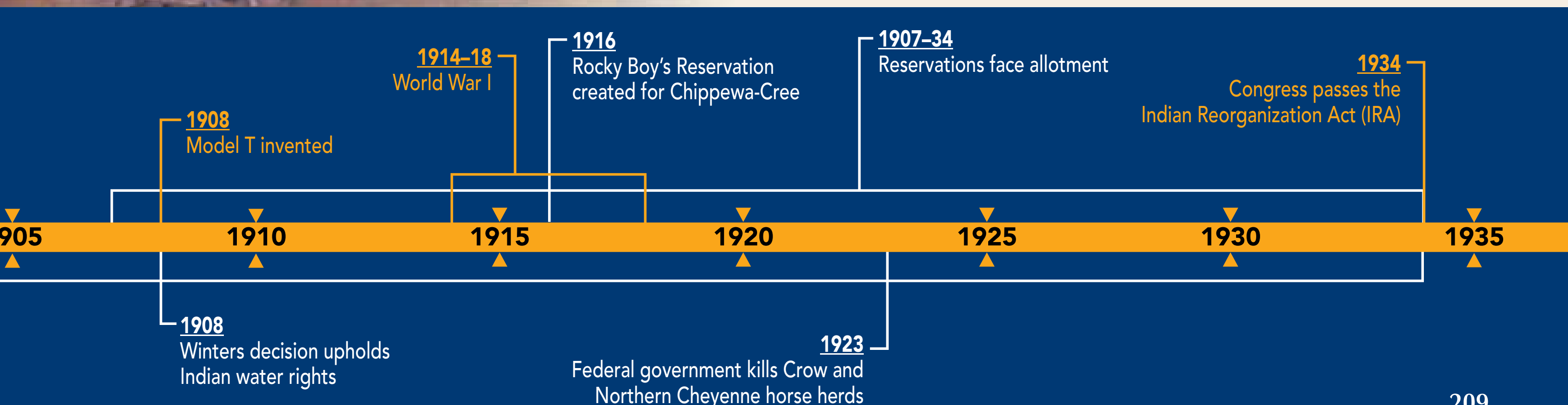
- How Indians survived without the bison
- How the U.S. government tried to destroy Indian culture
- What Indian people did to keep their cultural traditions alive
- Why non-Indians own so much land on some Indian reservations

# The Big Picture

After the bison were destroyed, Montana's Indians went through a period of tremendous change. These were years of great hardship for Indian people as they learned to live a new way. Their strength and adaptability helped them survive and pass on their cultural traditions.

In the late 1800s Montana's Indians entered a period of tremendous upheaval. The bison—once the center of life here—teetered on the brink of extinction. The expanding United States had overwhelmed the tribes' economic and military power and confined the native people to **reservations** (land that tribes reserved for their own use through treaties).

When the Indian tribes were strong, the U.S. government respected their **sovereignty** (powers of self-government). But when they became weak, the government took more control. Government policies imposed many difficulties on the Indian people as they adapted to a new way of life. The story of this period is one of great suffering—but also of great **perseverance** (strength and endurance).



# The Bison Era Comes to an End

In 1881 Sitting Bull—who had helped lead the Sioux during the Battle of the Little Bighorn—returned from Canada, where he and his band had fled at the end of the Great Sioux War. Returning to the United States meant surrendering to the U.S. Army. Sitting Bull did not want to give up his freedom, but his people were starving. The buffalo were gone. Even smaller game animals were hard to find.

On the day of his surrender, he gave his eight-year-old son, Crowfoot, his gun to turn over to the commanding officer. Then he said, "The boy has given it to you, and he now wants to know how he is going to make a living."

The question of how to make a living haunted all of Montana's Indians in the early reservation era.

## Starvation Winter: Trading More Land for Food

For most of the 1870s, Montana's tribes continued to live primarily on the game and plants they harvested, just as their ancestors had for generations. They depended very little on **annuities** (annual payments of food, equipment, supplies, and funds the U.S. government owed a tribe by treaty).

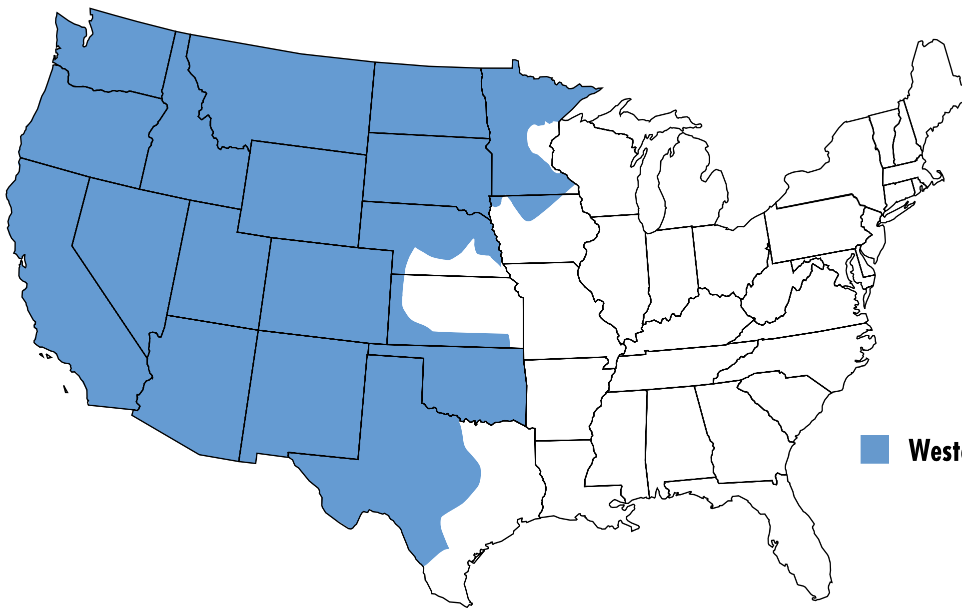
But by 1880 the bison were nearly gone, the population of settlers had boomed, and there was little game to hunt. The Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Sioux, and Assiniboine—who lived on a large reservation covering much of northern Montana—increasingly depended on government annuities for survival. These annuities were not charity; they were payments for land (see Chapter 7). Yet despite its treaty agreements, Congress reduced the amount of money it was willing to spend on annuities. For several years there was not enough food to get people through the winter.

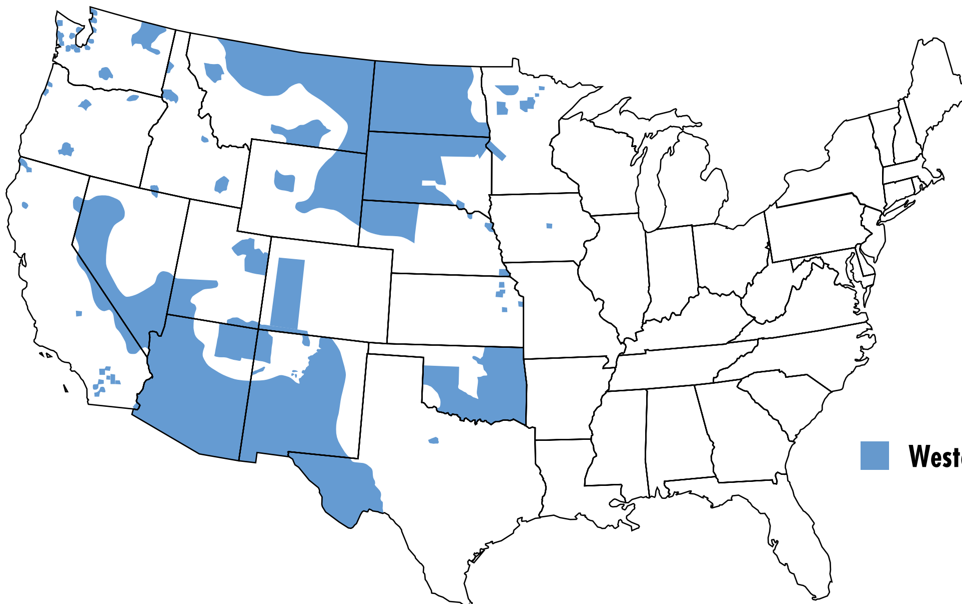
In 1883 winter storms came early. The few provisions that the government did send to the northern tribes were held up by early snows. Finally, in December, a wagonload of bacon arrived at

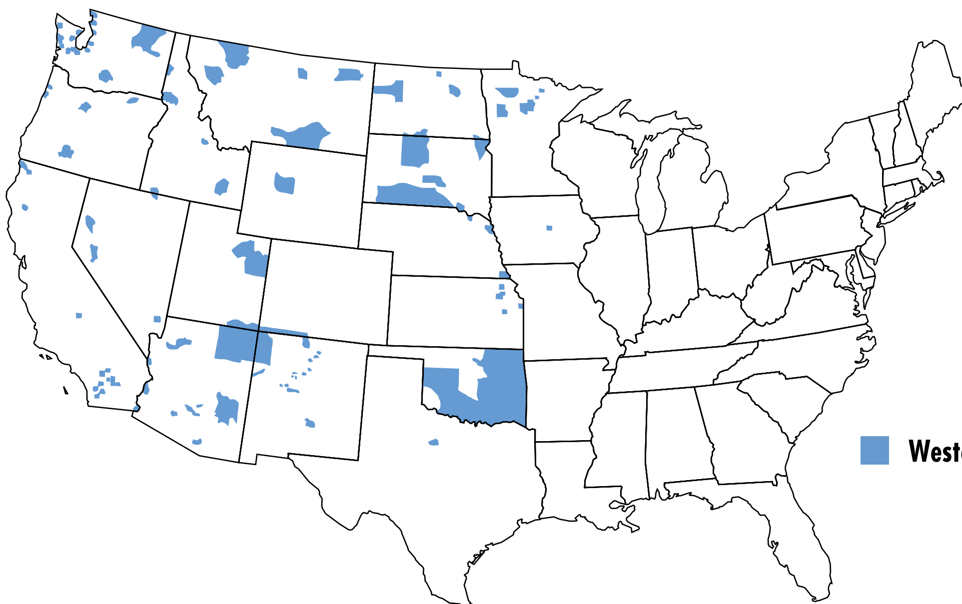
*FIGURE 11.2:* Confined to reservations and facing an unknown future, families like this one on the Crow Reservation wondered what was ahead for their children.

## Western Indian Lands, 1850–1890

*FIGURES 11.3, 11.4, and 11.5:* In 1850 Indian tribes owned all the lands in the western United States (shown in blue). In the next four decades, Indians **ceded** (gave up) more and more land. (Tribal land east of the Mississippi River is not shown.)



## "I Am Given Little Food"

"We old Indians never knew of any way of obtaining food except by hunting. The government promised to feed us if we would live on the reservations. But I am given very little food. Each month our Indian policeman brings me one quart of green coffee, one quart of sugar, a few pounds of flour and a small quantity of baking powder. I am told that I might get more if I should go each month and ask the agent for it. But my home is more than 20 miles over a mountain . . . It should not be expected that a 92-year-old woman get her food by personally going to the agency every month on a certain day and during certain hours of the day . . . It would be hard enough in summer. It is impossible in winter."

—IRON TEETH, A NORTHERN CHEYENNE WOMAN

Browning—so old it was contaminated with maggots.

Approximately one-quarter of the Blackfeet tribe—600 people—died from starvation. The Assiniboine lost approximately 300 people. Many Gros Ventre and Sioux also died from hunger and exposure. Tribal people call this period "Starvation Winter."

After Starvation Winter, the tribes sold the only resource they had left—land. The Sweetgrass Hills Agreement of 1888 reduced the large northern Indian reserve to three smaller reservations: the Blackfeet, Fort Belknap, and Fort Peck Reservations.

In 1895 the Blackfeet sold another strip of land that prospectors hoped would contain gold. When no gold was found there, most of this land became Glacier National Park. The next year the government pressured the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre to sell a 28-square-mile chunk of the sacred Little Rocky Mountains. There miners developed a large gold mine.

## Life on the Reservations

By 1888 nine Indian tribes—the Blackfeet, Crow, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, Sioux, Salish, Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille, and Northern Cheyenne—were living on six Montana reservations. (Rocky Boy's Reservation—home to members of the Chippewa and Cree tribes—was not established until 1916. See Chapter 15.)

*FIGURE 11.6:* Chief Mountain has been a sacred area to Blackfeet Indians for hundreds of years. It is part of the land the tribe sold in 1895. "Chief Mountain is my head," said Blackfeet leader White Calf. "Now my head is cut off." American painter John Fery (1859–1934) painted this picture of Chief Mountain around 1915.

Government policies on the reservations reflected what many non-Indians thought at the time: that the best way for Indians to adjust to a rapidly changing world was to give up their tribal traditions and live like **Euro-Americans** (Americans with European influence or ancestry). **Assimilation** (when one culture is absorbed into another, majority culture) was the goal of the reservations.

So while American Indian tribes struggled to main-

tain their cultural traditions in the face of change, the government's goal was to tear apart tribal traditions and replace them with Euro-American practices.

Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delando made this goal clear in 1872: "It is our duty to **coerce** (force) . . . [the Indians] into the adoption and practice of our habits and customs."

## Agents Controlled the Reservations

Each reservation had an agent, appointed by the commissioner of Indian affairs. The reservation agent managed the tribes' limited budget and controlled how the money was spent. He also set the rules for the reservation, and he could arrest people or withhold food rations if they broke those rules. The tribes owned the land, yet agents had almost complete control over life on the reservation.

Some agents worked hard to help the Indians on their reservations. Peter Ronan, a longtime agent on the Flathead Reservation, for example, tried to keep the railroad from cutting timber on the reservation and to keep white farmers from taking Indian land. However, most agents did not know very much about the Indian people they were supposed to be helping. Many agents came from far away and stayed for only a short time. Often they did not have enough knowledge, money, or supplies to do the job. And some were simply dishonest. They stole money from the tribes, sold tribal food for their own profit, or used tribal resources for their own gain.

On the more established reservations, like the Flathead Reservation, people had developed farms, ranches, and sawmills over several decades. Their economic independence gave them power to resist some government control. But on the poorest reservations, people depended on government annuities. The government agents could often control people by withholding food and supplies.

*FIGURE 11.7:* Hunger defined life on the reservations. That may be why these Blackfeet women are peering into the government slaughterhouse on beef-slaughtering day in 1887.

## Forcing a New Way

Even honest agents thought they were helping Indians by forcing them to abandon their traditional cultures and to adopt **mainstream** (majority) American culture. Agents pressured tribal members to change their

social customs, dress in European-style clothing, live in rectangular houses, become Christian, send their children to school, and learn farming and ranching the Euro-American way.

Agents often outlawed Indian religious ceremonies like the Sun Dance. They discouraged give-away ceremonies, a traditional practice of honoring the Creator by giving away food, blankets, horses, and other forms of wealth. If people performed their traditional practices or religious rituals, they could lose their food rations or be arrested. They also were not allowed to leave their reservations without a pass.

The reservation system tore apart tribal leadership. Each tribe had long-established traditions for earning leadership roles. But reservation life made it difficult for young men to become leaders in the traditional way because they could not **count coup** (earn respect by performing acts of bravery during a battle), host a Sun Dance, or complete other traditional requirements for leadership. Reservation agents sometimes selected their own "chiefs" and refused to deal with strong Indian leaders who disagreed with them.

By removing the Indians' traditional leadership, the government made it harder for people to make decisions. Tribal members knew they needed to make changes to survive. But they did not always agree on how fast things should change, and in what ways. These disagreements sometimes caused serious conflicts within the tribes.

For example, on the Blackfeet Reservation, one group pushed for economic development projects like oil development and irrigation, even

*FIGURE 11.8:* Blackfeet tribal members listen to a presentation on growing wheat at the Midwinter Fair in Browning in the 1920s.

though older, more traditional Blackfeet would not benefit. Another group wanted to slow down development to make sure tribal decisions were made according to traditional values. These arguments split the Blackfeet tribe. Some of these disagreements continue today.

*FIGURE 11.9:* Sometimes adapting means fitting a traditional skill to a new purpose. A Sioux beader made this elaborately decorated hide bag to carry ration coupons, which each Indian family needed to collect food rations.

### The People Kept Their Cultures Alive

Montana's Indians knew they needed to learn new skills and find new ways to support themselves. But they refused to abandon their tribal identities and cultural traditions to survive.

They performed give-aways and held religious ceremonies in secret. They turned patriotic and religious holidays—like the Fourth of July and Easter—into celebrations of their own traditions.

In 1898 the tribes of the Flathead Reservation held their first Fourth of July **pow-wow** (an American Indian celebration). They staged parades, held contests, sang and drummed together, and danced traditional dances like the War Dance and the Snake Dance deep into the night. Indians on other reservations also held celebrations on July 4. The organizers assured the reservation agent that these gatherings were purely social, but they actually performed important religious and tribal ceremonies.

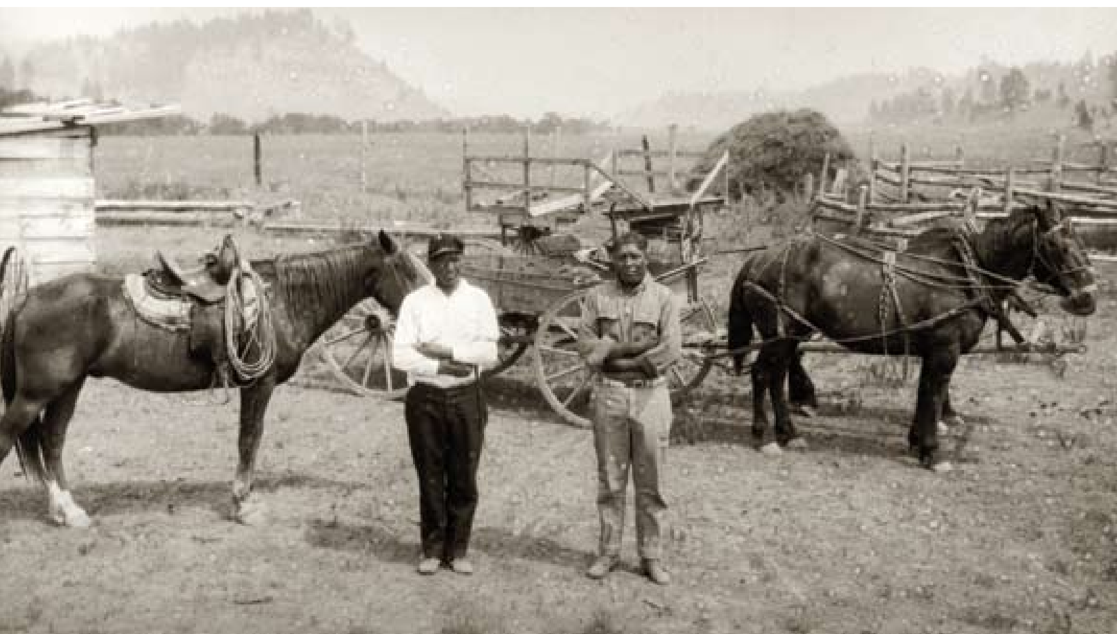
Federal agents also started county fairs on reservations to show off Indians' farming accomplishments. In 1904, for example, the Crow Reservation agent started the Crow Fair. At the fair, the Crow staged parades, horse races, and rodeos. They used the fair to reinforce tribal values and traditions. Today Crow Fair is one of the most popular summer events in Montana.

*FIGURE 11.10:* The Gros Ventre and Assiniboine of the Fort Belknap Reservation turned the Fourth of July in 1904 into an opportunity to perform important ceremonies. The family in the foreground is conducting a give-away.

### Diseases Set Everyone Back

While each reservation was different, they all struggled against poverty and disease. Sudden changes in how American Indians lived and what they ate made them especially vulnerable to illness. Poor sanitation, crowded living conditions, and lack of nutritious food helped spread contagious diseases.

**Tuberculosis** (an infectious lung disease) was the leading killer of American Indians in the early reservation years. Tuberculosis



sickened one-third of the entire American Indian population, and up to 90 percent on some reservations. **Trachoma** (a contagious eye disease that causes blindness) affected one in every five American Indians. Thousands of non-Indians suffered and died from these diseases, too, but they were most prevalent on Indian reservations.

*FIGURE 11.11:* Northern Cheyenne farmers Wesley Whiteman (left) and James Flying Bird (right) grew wheat, oats, alfalfa, and seven gardens full of vegetables. Whiteman said later, "I put the watermelon and cantaloupe on the side hill and when they got ripe they'd come off the vine and roll down to a place where I'd pick them up."

## Making a Living on the Reservations

Indian people learned Euro-American farming techniques as a way to make a living after the bison were gone. The Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai people of western Montana had been growing vegetables and wheat since the 1850s. Their hard work, their hand-dug irrigation system, and the rich, loamy soils of the region helped the people of the Flathead Reservation make headway against the grinding poverty that reservation life usually brought.

The Northern Cheyenne people had begun farming and timber cutting in the 1880s, even before they had a reservation. The Crow people, too, gained some successes in farming. Far back in Crow history—before the Crow people came to the Plains—they had been agriculturalists. Perhaps this helped them become successful farmers during this period.

Some reservation farmers struggled to build farms and learn how to operate unfamiliar equipment. Often the government did not send adequate equipment and funding, as promised in the treaties. On the Flathead Reservation, there were not enough plows to work the 80 fields of wheat. Reservation agent John Mullan reported that one old Salish man "planted a considerable crop this year, literally scratching it in with his nails."

### Water and the Winters Decision

While Indians were building their farms, their non-Indian neighbors were also building farms and ranches. Non-Indians often grazed their cattle on reservation lands and diverted water from rivers and streams to irrigate their farms. On the Fort Belknap Reservation, an argument over water turned into a **landmark** (historically important) court decision establishing water rights for Indian tribes.

In 1905 the Fort Belknap Reservation agent, William R. Logan, complained to the commissioner of Indian affairs that nearby farmers were

diverting water from the Milk River before it could flow through the reservation. "So far this spring, we have had no water in our ditch whatever," he wrote. "All will be lost unless some radical action is taken . . . To the Indians it means either good crops this fall or starvation this winter."

*FIGURE 11.12:* The Fort Belknap tribes built this dam across the Milk River to supply water to reservation farmlands. But upriver settlers took so much water that there was not enough left for the reservation. Ultimately, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the tribes' water rights.

The argument over water rights went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The court's ruling became known as the Winters decision (after one of the people involved in the case). The Winters decision upheld the Indians' rights to the water based on treaty agreements. This victory gave Indian tribes all over the United States a vital tool in their struggle to survive and to remain on their land.

### Ranching on the Reservations

Many tribal members embraced ranching. Cattle ranching and horse raising allowed them to support their families while practicing time-honored cultural values like feeding relatives and giving away cattle and horses. Reservation ranchers formed cattlemen's associations based on family groups and clans, which helped strengthen traditional social structures.

Ranching on the reservation sometimes conflicted with traditional tribal values. Reservation agents pressured ranchers to work for profit, save money, buy more equipment, and become more successful. But tribal tradition encouraged everyone to work for the good of the tribe and help anyone in need.

On the Blackfeet Reservation, some ranchers sold off their cattle during hard winters to help feed hungry relatives. But when they did not show a profit, the reservation agent labeled them "incompetent" and did not allow them any more opportunities. Each tribe and family struggled to find a balance between tribal traditions and new definitions of success.

### The Government Kills Off Crow and Cheyenne Herds

Indian agents were supposed to encourage Indian ranchers to work for their own gain. But in 1914 the agent on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation **confiscated** (took) 20,000 to 30,000 cattle owned by

“There were dead horses everywhere. It was a horrible smell. To add insult to injury, they came from Billings with wagons and loaded the bones of our brothers, the horses, to take them for fertilizer. They said they killed 44,000 horses, but it was way more than that.”

—*JOE MEDICINE CROW, CROW HISTORIAN*

individual Northern Cheyenne ranchers. These Cheyenne ranchers had established a reputation for high-quality cattle. When the agent took their cattle, they lost everything they had worked for.

**Agency** (reservation headquarters) officials began managing the herd for reservation use. But they failed to provide winter feed and left the cattle on the summer grounds through midwinter. Within a few years there were only 4,000 cattle left. The reservation agent sold them off, and the government opened the reservation to grazing for white cattlemen. The Northern Cheyenne people once again plunged into poverty.

Dr. Richard Littlebear, a Northern Cheyenne educator and college president, said his grandfather had been a relatively successful rancher before 1914. “He owned livestock, had built a house, and was providing well for his family,” Littlebear said. “After the government took his livestock away . . . all incentive seemed to desert him. This happened to many Northern Cheyenne families.”

The pressure by non-Indians to spread onto reservation lands continued. In 1919 the government ordered the Crow and Northern Cheyenne tribes to reduce the number of horses on the reservation. The horses ate grass that white ranchers wanted for their cattle. These ranchers paid the agents for grazing rights on the reservations.

*FIGURE 11.13:* The relationship between Plains Indians and their horses ran deep and strong. Here, John Stands in Timber Jr., a Northern Cheyenne, stands with his horse.

The government wanted the horses killed because the herds did not have economic value. The tribes refused. As historian Joe Medicine Crow wrote, it “was like ordering a man to kill his best friend or brother.”

In 1923 the government contracted with non-Indian cattlemen to shoot thousands of horses on the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservations. “One large outfit had to import Texas gunmen to do the shooting, as local cowboys were soon disgusted with the slaughter,” wrote Medicine Crow.

### Other Reservation Industries

The Flathead, Crow, and Northern Cheyenne Reservations all had timber abundant enough to support commercial sawmills. At first

government employees, not tribal members, ran the mills and used the lumber. Indian people did not get to cut and sell timber.

After 1900 the Indian tribes regained some control over their forestlands. Forestry and lumber milling became an important part of the tribal economy on the Flathead, Crow, and Northern Cheyenne Reservations.

Each tribe worked to develop the resources it had. For example, the Blackfeet tribe tried to gain some economic benefit from oil. The tribe itself lacked the funds to invest in oil equipment and the expertise to drill for oil. Instead, it leased its oil resources to non-Indian developers. But the federal government discouraged oil leases on the reservations and sometimes failed to enforce the terms of the leases they had agreed to. So the tribe received only a few thousand dollars from several small oil leases during the 1920s.

*FIGURE 11.14:* Many American Indians expanded their economic opportunities by making crafts to sell to tourists at Montana's national parks. Yellowstone National Park gift shops sold Indian-made **parfleche** (rawhide) wastebaskets like this one, as well as hand-beaded purses and picture frames.

## The Dawes Act: Allotments Subdivide the Reservations

One purpose of the reservations was to turn Indians into farmers. This was part of Thomas Jefferson's view of America as a nation of small farmers who owned their own land (see Chapter 4).

In the 1880s concerned non-Indians worried that American Indians were not becoming farmers fast enough. Some wanted to help Indians expand their economies and attract businesses onto their reservations. At the same time, Montana ranchers and farmers continually pressured the government to open up more reservation land for farms and cattle grazing.

As a result of these various pressures, Congress passed the Dawes Act of 1887 (also called the General Allotment Act). The act was named after its sponsor, U.S. senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts. The Dawes Act is one of the most important and controversial laws in American Indian history. Its effects are still felt today (see Chapter 22).

The Dawes Act had several goals: to break up tribes as economic units, to encourage individual initiative, to reduce the government's costs of running the reservations, and to provide more land to white settlers. Supporters thought the Dawes Act would help destroy tribes, which they saw as obstacles to assimilation.

The Dawes Act provided for reservation lands to be **allotted** (divided up) into individual parcels about the size of a small family farm. Heads of households were typically assigned 160 acres. Unmarried tribal members over age 18 usually received 80 acres. (Married women could not receive allotments until after 1891.)

*FIGURE 11.15:* Oil discoveries in northern Montana made companies very interested in drilling for oil on Blackfeet land. These two people are watching the tank fill up with the first commercial production of oil from an oil lease site on the Blackfeet Reservation.

> **“It has become the settled policy of the Government to break up reservations, destroy tribal relations, settle Indians upon their own homesteads, incorporate them into the national life, and deal with them not as nations or tribes or bands, but as individual citizens.”**
>
> —*COMMISSIONER OF INDIAN AFFAIRS THOMAS J. MORGAN, 1890*

Once land was allotted, it was owned by an individual, not by the tribe. Allotted lands were held in **trust** (when something is owned by one person but managed by another—in this case, the government) for 25 years. After that, they could be sold.

The land that was not allotted to Indian individuals or families could be declared **surplus**—extra. Often these surplus lands were sold to white settlers, businesses, and homesteaders at discount prices.

The Dawes Act affected each reservation differently. Allotments came to the Crow Reservation first, starting in 1888. But it took many years to complete the allotment process, and before it was finished, Crow leaders fought for—and won—the right to determine how the process would work. After allotments were completed in the early 1920s, most of the land remained in the hands of tribal members. Determined and skillful Crow negotiators kept land from being sold to non-Indians as "surplus" land.

*FIGURE 11.16:* This poster, issued by the U.S. secretary of the interior in 1910, offered Indian lands to farmers and speculators at low prices. In Montana the government offered 11,034 acres at $9.86 per acre—about $216 today.

INDIAN LAND FOR SALE

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IN 1910 THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR SOLD UNDER SEALED BIDS ALLOTTED INDIAN LAND AS FOLLOWS:

| Location. | Acres. | Average Price per Acre. | Location. | Acres. | Average Price per Acre. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Colorado | 5,211.21 | $7.27 | Oklahoma | 34,664.00 | $19.14 |
| Idaho | 17,013.00 | 24.85 | Oregon | 1,020.00 | 15.43 |
| Kansas | 1,684.50 | 33.45 | South Dakota | 120,445.00 | 16.53 |
| Montana | 11,034.00 | 9.86 | Washington | 4,879.00 | 41.37 |
| Nebraska | 5,641.00 | 36.65 | Wisconsin | 1,069.00 | 17.00 |
| North Dakota | 22,610.70 | 9.93 | Wyoming | 865.00 | 20.64 |

FOR THE YEAR 1911 IT IS ESTIMATED THAT 350,000 ACRES WILL BE OFFERED FOR SALE

For information as to the character of the land write for booklet, "INDIAN LANDS FOR SALE," to the Superintendent U. S. Indian School at any one of the following places:

CALIFORNIA: Hoopa. COLORADO: Ignacio. IDAHO: Lapwai. KANSAS: Horton. Nadeau.
MINNESOTA: Onigum. MONTANA: Crow Agency. NEBRASKA: Macy. Santee. Winnebago.
NORTH DAKOTA: Fort Totten. Fort Yates. OKLAHOMA: Anadarko. Cantonment. Colony. Darlington. Muskogee. Pawnee.
OKLAHOMA—Con. Sac and Fox Agency. Shawnee. Wyandotte. OREGON: Klamath Agency. Pendleton. Roseburg. Siletz.
SOUTH DAKOTA: Cheyenne Agency. Crow Creek. Greenwood. Lower Brule. Pine Ridge. Rosebud. Sisseton.
WASHINGTON: Fort Simcoe. Fort Spokane. Tekoa. Tulalip. WISCONSIN: Oneida.

WALTER L. FISHER, Secretary of the Interior.

ROBERT G. VALENTINE, Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

Allotments began on the Blackfeet Reservation in 1907. The government designated 156,000 acres as surplus. The Blackfeet tribe was $1 million in debt after following federal instructions to build a large irrigation system. To pay off this debt, the government wanted to sell off the surplus land as quickly as possible.

But the Blackfeet protested the land sale. An educated Blackfeet spokesman named Robert Hamilton testified repeatedly before congressional committees and with the federal Office of Indian Affairs. Finally, in 1919, Congress accepted a compromise. Surplus Blackfeet land was added to individual allotments and remained in Blackfeet hands.

The Fort Peck Reservation was allotted between 1908 and 1913. This was the height of the homestead boom (see Chapter 13). Each adult male received 320 acres plus a few acres of farm and timber lands. After allotments were completed, the government declared 1.3 million acres surplus and open to homesteaders. Today most of the best agricultural land on the Fort Peck Reservation is owned by non-Indians.

Allotments came to the Flathead Reservation in 1908—despite strong protests from the tribes who lived there. After allotments, the government intended to declare the rest of the reservation surplus and open it for sale. Salish chief Charlot, who had defended his people's right to remain in the Bitterroot Valley in the 1880s, protested any further loss of tribal lands. He already had told the government, in 1901, "I won't sell a foot!"

The government delayed until Chief Charlot died, in 1910. Two weeks after Charlot's death, the government announced that it would open 1 million acres of the reservation for sale to homesteaders. More than two-thirds of the Flathead Reservation lands—including most of the fertile Mission Valley—transferred out of tribal hands (see the maps in Chapter 13).

On the Fort Belknap Reservation, tribal leaders saw allotments as a way to preserve the land they had left. Large tracts of their reservation lands had been illegally sold off. They had also lost a large chunk of the Little Rockies, when the government forced the tribes to sell it for a gold-mining operation in 1896. Profits from these land sales never made it into tribal hands.

Scared that the government would take even more of their land, the Fort Belknap tribes lobbied to have the reservation allotted. They successfully insisted that all the land go to tribal members. Their reservation was allotted in 1923.

The Northern Cheyennes also fought to preserve their reservation lands. They were able to postpone allotments until 1932–34, and the tribe managed to retain ownership of most of its land.

*FIGURE 11.17:* Salish farmers, like the one shown here driving a McCormick harvester outfit, were as prosperous as local non-Indian farmers before allotments.

## The Results of Allotment

Think about what it would be like if someone came into your home, confined you to the room you happened to be standing in, and sold the rest of the house because you were not using it. For many Indian people, this is what allotment was like.

Together Montana's reservations lost more than 400,000 acres of land—in some cases the only farmable land on the reservation—to non-Indian ownership. Before allotments, tribal members on the Flathead Reservation were about as well-off as non-Indian farmers. But losing access to farmland, grazing land, and other important resources drove many of them into poverty.

On the Blackfeet, Crow, and Flathead Reservations, the government had urged tribes to spend large amounts of money to build irrigation projects. But those irrigation projects ended up mostly helping the non-Indian farmers who moved onto the reservations—not the Indians who paid for the improvements.

Allotments also changed how land was used on reservations. It forced some tribal members to sell off large horse and cattle herds that could no longer graze on **communal** (shared by all members of a community) reservation lands. Where it was too dry to farm, Indian landowners often sold their allotments just to pay their taxes or buy food. The Blackfeet, for example, lost 200,000 acres between 1912 and 1929. Most of the land went to local businesses to pay debts for items purchased at their stores.

In the 47 years that allotments were in effect, tribes across the West lost 70 percent of their remaining lands. Years later John Collier, the U.S. commissioner of Indian affairs, wrote that allotments had caused "poverty bordering on starvation in many areas, a 30 percent **illiteracy rate** (percentage of people who cannot read), a death rate twice that of the white population, and the loss of more than 90 million acres of Indian land."

*FIGURE 11.18:* Crow Indian policemen were paid $6 ($140 today) for each child they delivered to school. A Crow boy attending Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania drew this picture of reservation agent Major Wyman and a tribal policeman collecting a little Crow girl from her mother.

# Losing Our Selves: The Boarding School Experience

Imagine being rounded up by foreigners, taken from your parents, and sent to a strange institution far away from home. Your clothes are burned. Your hair is cut off—something that usually happens when

a family member dies. You are punished for speaking your own language. You are given a new, unfamiliar name and made to answer to it. People you do not know force you to eat, sleep, talk, and work in a way that is strange to you. No matter how homesick you get, you may not see your parents again for many years.

**"I attended the Fort Belknap Boarding School when I was five years old . . . The little ones, I saw them clinging to their mothers 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 the kids away from their mother's arms."**

—*VERNIE PERRY, ASSINIBOINE, FORT BELKNAP*

Many Americans thought that the fastest way to help Indian people **assimilate** (be absorbed into the majority culture) was to remove Indian children from their families and bring them up as white children. So thousands of Indian children were sent to boarding schools. Reservation agents forced parents to surrender their children so they could be sent to school. Sometimes families lost their food rations for not cooperating.

**"The Indians do not take kindly to these schools. It has been necessary to use force to get pupils and keep them in school. It is one of those cases, however, where force must be added to persuasion and reason to have the Indians do what is best for themselves."**

—*J. W. WATSON, CROW RESERVATION AGENT, IN 1894*

Most of Montana's Indians favored education. They wanted their children to learn new skills and professions. But they did not want their children taken away from them. And they did not want their children to lose respect for tribal traditions.

Many children went to boarding schools on the reservations. Often their parents would camp near the schools, hoping to see their children.

Some educators believed that students would assimilate faster if they were removed from the reservations entirely. After 1890 several thousand of Montana's Indian children were sent far away: to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, the Haskell Indian School in Kansas, or the Chemawa Indian School in Oregon. Most of these students did not return home for many years.

The goal of the schools was to erase the children's memories of their native language and culture and to reshape them as non-Indians. Students studied half the day and worked the other half in laundries, kitchens, leather shops, and dairies. They learned English, math, and how to structure their day by the clock. A retired military officer oversaw the Carlisle school, which he ran like a military unit. Students wore uniforms, marched in military formation, and submitted to disciplines like beatings and imprisonment in solitary cells.

Many of the schools were overcrowded, which meant that diseases like tuberculosis spread quickly. Some playgrounds were dotted with gravestones of the children who died at school.

Many children tried to run away—especially from boarding schools that were on the reservations. Tribal police were paid to bring them

“Our belongings were taken from us, even the little medicine bags our mothers had given us to protect us from harm. Everything was placed in a heap and set afire. Next was the long hair, the pride of all the Indians. The boys, one by one, would break down and cry when they saw their braids thrown on the floor.”

—*LONE WOLF, A BLACKFEET CHILD WHO WAS SENT TO CARLISLE INDIAN INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL*

back. Reservation schools usually allowed parents to see their children for short vacations. But students at the faraway schools were sent to white families to work during school vacations.

### Educated Indians Helped Their Tribes

Even though boarding schools caused much pain and heartache, they also taught Indian children new skills. Educated Indians returned home with job skills and knowledge that helped them improve life on the reservations.

Crow chief Plenty Coups knew how important it was for the tribe to have young, educated Indians who knew how to speak, write, and negotiate with white lawyers and politicians. As young educated men returned from off-reservation boarding schools, he put them to work making sure the government fulfilled its treaty obligations. Some, like Robert Yellowtail, negotiated with Congress and became activist leaders.

One powerful example happened in 1898. A government delegation pressured the Crow tribe to give up more land for railroads and homesteads. Plenty Coups told the delegation that the government already was behind on payments already promised. “When you have made these settlements to the Indians, then you can come back and I and my people will talk to you about these lands you now want,” he said.

Then Plenty Coups introduced a group of young men just back from government schools. One of them, Carl Leider, stepped up and read an itemized list of the payments the government had promised—and failed—to make. Leider stunned the commissioners. They left, promising to postpone discussions until payments could be made.

Blackfeet leader Robert Hamilton stood up for the rights of traditional full-blood Blackfeet people against a group of mixed-blood Blackfeet businessmen who wanted to control most of the tribe’s resources. The government listened to the businessmen because they supported economic development programs.

*FIGURE 11.19:* Girls at the Fort Shaw Indian School (a former military fort southwest of Great Falls) learned sewing, embroidery, knitting, and other household skills so they could take domestic jobs when they were finished with school.

But Hamilton spoke for the traditional families who lived in desperate poverty because of federal programs. Hamilton had graduated from Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and his knowledge and **eloquence** (ability to speak convincingly) made Congress listen. His leadership kept the tribe from losing power, money, and much of its land base.

> **"A year before I was sent away [to school] my grandfather died. When he died he called me to his death bed. He said, 'I want you to promise me that you will become educated and that you will be the first one to go ahead and do this for all the family.' He put a lot on my shoulders, and I told him I would."**
>
> —*MINERVA ALLEN, CHIPPEWA, ASSINIBOINE, AND GROS VENTRE EDUCATOR FROM FORT BELKNAP*

The boarding school era lasted from 1880 to 1934. During that time, family ties broke apart. Several generations of Indian children grew up far from the love and guidance of parents, family, and community. When they had children of their own, they had no role models for parenthood. Many American Indian families still struggle with the aftereffects of the boarding school era.

Yet many children found ways to survive and maintain their cultural identity. They forged **intertribal** (between tribes) friendships that later

*FIGURE 11.20:* These 12 graduates at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1892 were from seven different tribes. Many Indian students befriended and married members of other tribes, establishing intertribal connections that helped American Indians gain political power.

empowered American Indians to work together for political and cultural changes. Many returned home to help their tribes. Their creativity and **resilience** (ability to withstand great stress) helped them to use what they learned about mainstream American law and politics to begin making changes.

*FIGURE 11.21:* This beaded bag, created about 1940, expresses its creator's devotion to traditional beading skills—and her exposure to things her great-grandparents never saw.

## People of Strength and Power Endure

The native people of the Northern Rocky Mountains had endured a century of transformation. Throughout the 1800s they saw a new population sweep across their lands. They suffered terribly from disease. And they lost the bison, the primary resource upon which their cultures depended.

At the end of the 1800s, many non-Indians assumed that Indian tribes would soon disappear. Disease, loss of land, and attempts to destroy American Indian cultures did much damage. Nevertheless, Montana's Indian people managed to adapt. Not only did they survive, but they also preserved important aspects of their cultures.

Today the number of tribal members is growing. As Blackfeet Tribal Council chairman Earl Old Person put it, "Our ability to adapt to the environment and to change is infinite and assures our survival. The struggles Indian people went through to survive . . . have made us stronger and it is through this experience that we can conquer the obstacles ahead."

*FIGURE 11.22:* Despite many obstacles, American Indians preserved and passed on their Indian identity and culture while they struggled to adjust to enormous changes in their world.

## Expressions of the People

# Star Quilts

In the late 1800s some church women in the Dakotas began teaching quilting to Sioux women on the reservations. The Sioux women particularly liked one quilt pattern called the star quilt. They associated the star quilt pattern with the sacred circle and the morning star—two powerful images in Northern Plains cultures.

The Sioux adapted the craft of quilt making to their own traditions. They began developing their own star quilt designs using what scraps of fabric were available. They cut **templates** (patterns) for their quilt pieces out of tin or wood, and later cardboard or plastic oatmeal lids. They stitched important cultural symbols into their patterns. And they passed on their skills and knowledge to the younger women.

Star quilting quickly spread across the Fort Peck Reservation. Each quilter learned the craft from her teacher—usually an aunt, grandmother, or close friend. But she had to develop her own creative ideas for pattern, color, and use of images or decorative items.

A star quilter occasionally sold her work, but most quilts were made to give away. Women made quilts for marriages, births, and coming-of-age ceremonies. They gave them to soldiers leaving for war and to young men embarking on spiritual quests.

*FIGURE 11.23:* This star quilt, made by Almira Jackson of the Fort Peck Reservation, is based on early Euro-American quilting traditions. Yet the quilter used her own design ideas to celebrate things important to her tribe: the morning star, the sacred circle, and the Indian tipi.

*FIGURE 11.24:* Creative use of stitching, fabrics, and ribbon make this red satin, war bonnet star quilt unique. It was made on the Fort Peck Reservation (maker unknown) and was presented to Governor Marc Racicot in the 1990s.

And when a person died, a star quilt might drape the coffin, wrap the body, or hang on the wall during the funeral.

Over the years the star quilt has become a vital part of Northern Plains Indian culture. Because of their beauty and difficulty, star quilts became the center of give-away ceremonies. Each quilt represents many days of detailed work. The Sioux and Assiniboine gain honor by giving away something of such value and traditional importance.

Star quilts blend contemporary artistry with ancient traditions. By adopting a Euro-American art form and making it their own, star quilters have enriched Sioux and Assiniboine culture with creativity and vigor.

*FIGURE 11.25:* Star quilts are often made to give away. This give-away took place in Poplar in 1934.

# CHAPTER 11 REVIEW

### CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Identify: (a) Carl Leider; (b) Robert Hamilton
2. Define: (a) sovereignty; (b) annuities; (c) assimilation; (d) count coup; (e) pow-wow
3. What was the Starvation Winter?
4. Describe the job of an Indian agent. List some of the problems with this system.
5. How did the U.S. government try to undermine Indian culture? What did Indian people do to keep their cultural traditions alive?
6. List some of the challenges tribal members encountered when they started farming and ranching.
7. What is the Winters decision?
8. What industries besides agriculture did tribal nations work to develop on their reservations?
9. What is the Dawes Act?
10. What does holding land "in trust" mean?
11. Which tribes lost the most land under the allotment policy? Which tribes lost the least?
12. How did allotments change land use?
13. Why were Indian children sent to boarding schools?
14. What was life like at most boarding schools?
15. How did tribal members use their boarding school education to serve their tribes?

### CRITICAL THINKING

1. When Sitting Bull's son gave the leader's gun to the U.S. Army, Sitting Bull said, "The boy has given it [the gun] to you, and he now wants to know how he is going to make a living." What do you think he meant by this?
2. How did (and do) traditional tribal values (like sharing, working for the good of the tribe, and preserving the land) sometimes make it hard for an individual to become rich? What factors would influence your decision if you were forced to choose between traditional values and economic success?
3. Look at the photograph on page 214 of the Midwinter Fair. How do you think the Blackfeet in this photo might have felt about an outsider telling them how to use the land they had lived on for centuries?
4. Philosopher Albert Camus wrote, "The evil that is in the world almost always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as **malevolence** [wickedness]." Apply this quotation to the allotment and boarding school eras.
5. What are some of the legacies of the Indian boarding school era? Are there both positive and negative long-term effects?

### PAST TO PRESENT

1. One legacy of the boarding school era is the loss of tribal languages. Research current efforts on many Montana reservations to revive native languages. Do you think preserving Indian languages is important? Why or why not?
2. How is Indian culture taught at school today? How is it recognized more broadly in your community? How do you think it should be taught and recognized?

### MAKE IT LOCAL

1. How did the history outlined in this chapter affect the families (both Indian and non-Indian) who live on the reservation closest to you?

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Create a Venn diagram to compare Plains Indian lifestyles in 1800 and Indian life on the reservations in 1900. Think about the housing, clothing, food, and daily activities of Indians during both eras. Then write a paragraph describing your findings.
2. Make a map of Montana showing the progression of the size and number of Indian reservations. Use different colors or patterns to illustrate how the reservation borders changed over time.
3. Read some first-person accounts and other narratives about life at Indian boarding schools. Then write a historical report, create a play, write a short story, or make a poster describing what that life was like.
4. Design a star quilt.
5. Create a bar graph comparing the percentage of Indian-owned land to the total percentage of land on each reservation as of 2005.

# Credits

The following abbreviations are used in the credits:

BBHC Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming
GNPA Glacier National Park Archives
LOC Library of Congress
MAC Montana Arts Council, Helena
MDEQ Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Helena
MDT Montana Department of Transportation, Helena
MFWP Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena
MHS Montana Historical Society, Helena
MHSA Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena
MHSL Montana Historical Society Library, Helena
MHS Mus. Montana Historical Society Museum, Helena
MHS PA Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena
MSU COT Montana State University College of Technology, Billings
NMAI National Museum American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
MSU Billings Special Collections, Montana State University Billings Library
NARA National Archives and Records Administration
NPS National Park Service
NRIS Natural Resource Information System, Montana State Library, Helena
SHPO State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society, Helena
TM Travel Montana, Helena
UM Missoula Archives & Special Collections, The University of Montana-Missoula
USDA United States Department of Agriculture
USFS United States Forest Service
WMM World Museum of Mining, Butte

**Chapter 11**

FIG. 11.1 *Reservation Scene,* William Standing, MHS Mus.

FIG. 11.2 Crow Indians, 1888, photo by O. S. Goff, Fort Custer, MT, MHS PA 955-809

FIG. 11.3 Western Indian Lands before 1850, map by MHS, based on information from maps.com

FIG. 11.4 Western Indian Lands by 1870, map by MHS, based on information from maps.com

FIG. 11.5 Western Indian Lands by 1890, map by MHS, based on information from maps.com

FIG. 11.6 *Chief Mountain,* by John Fery, courtesy BNSF Railway Company, Fort Worth, Texas

FIG. 11.7 Indians Agency on Badger Creek, 1887, MHS PA 955-537

FIG. 11.8 Midwinter Fair, Browning, MT, 1920s, MHS PA 955-532

FIG. 11.9 Beaded hide bag for ration cards, MHS Mus. X1976.08.27

FIG. 11.10 Ft. Belknap give-away, photo by S. W. Matteson, Milwaukee Public Museum

FIG. 11.11 Two Northern Cheyenne farmers, BBHC, Thomas Marquis Collection, PN.165.2.55

FIG. 11.12 Dam across Milk River, Ft. Belknap, MT, MHS PA 955-363

FIG. 11.13 John Stands in Timber Jr., BBHC, Thomas Marquis Collection, PN.165.2.70

FIG. 11.14 Parfleche wastebasket, MHS Mus. X1978.46.194

FIG. 11.15 Oil tank on Blackfeet Reservation, MHS PA 957-569

FIG. 11.16 Indian Land for Sale poster, courtesy LOC, Broadside Portfolio 240, Number 24, Rare Book Collection

FIG. 11.17 Flathead Irrigation Project, MHS PA 954-574

FIG. 11.18 Tribal policeman collecting young girl for school, Charles H. Barstow Collection, MSU Billings 1930.51

FIG. 11.19 Ft. Shaw Indian School, MHS PA 947-401

FIG. 11.20 Indian Industrial School, Carlisle, PA, 1892, photo by Choate, MHS PA 956-052

FIG. 11.21 Beaded elephant purse, MHS Mus. x1957.05

FIG. 11.22 Smiling children, BBHC, Thomas Marquis Collection, PN.165.2.79

FIG. 11.23 Give-away star quilt, made by Almira Jackson, image courtesy Linda Parker, Helena

FIG. 11.24 *Warbonnet* star quilt, presented to Governor Marc Racicot, image courtesy Linda Parker, Helena

FIG. 11.25 Quilt give-away, Dakota women, Poplar, MT, courtesy Minnesota Historical Society Loc#E92 r1