American Indian culture has not only survived 150 years of intensive effort to eradicate it, it is once again flourishing and undergoing a rebirth, a revitalization. This section looks at Blackfeet culture, past and present. But to understand our culture, or any American Indian culture, it is useful to understand *why* it has refused to die.

Through it all, we Blackfeet have remained a deeply spiritual people that have struggled to preserve and protect our culture, language, way of life, and way of thinking. We have an incredibly rich heritage of traditions, customs, beliefs, art, and stories. We have kept the flame of our culture alive through times when it was in constant danger of being extinguished. Today, thanks to our elders and ancestors who kept it flickering, the flame is burning brighter and brighter every year. It will soon be a blaze that will eventually outshine and outlive societies with shallower roots, a weaker notion of who they are and why they are here, and a lesser sense of obligation to the natural world, their community, and to each other.

Preserving our way of life has not been easy. Since the Europeans came, Blackfeet, like all Indians, have had to fend off non-stop attacks on our way of life, culminating in the late 1800s with the official government policy of assimilation. The assumption behind this misguided, paternal policy was that the white way of life was best, and therefore Indians should stop being Indians and start living, acting, and thinking like whites. In other words: “Become civilized like us, and you will be happier and better off.”

So it was ignorance and a false sense of superiority, moreso than malice, that caused high-minded, urban easterners to make policies that created Indian boarding schools, forbade young Indians to speak their first language, and forced them to cut their hair and dress like whites.

It was ignorance because these policies overlooked two immutable facts: **First,** there never was anything intrinsically superior about the “civilized” lifestyle and worldview to begin with. Indians lived prosperously and successfully for thousands of years without ever making for themselves the problems Europeans made in far less time: genocide, disease, nonstop wars of conquest and religion, wholesale pollution of the earth, rigid class systems that disregard intellect and merit and trap vast segments of humanity in poverty and virtual slavery, political systems that oppress and leech upon all but the privileged few, science and learning whose main aim is to advance military technology or further an ideology, and a general view that man, not the natural world, is why the universe exists.

Second, for the reasons noted in the previous paragraph and for a thousand other reasons, **Indians like being Indians. Indians want to be Indians. Indians will always fight to remain Indians.**
Our ancestors and elders did not want to be socially reengineered by people who never understood us to begin with, especially when our lives and societies were already better than the lives and societies of those who would reengineer us.

Completely lost on these would-be social engineers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is this: If the purpose of America is "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" who is fuller of life, freer, and happier than Indians left to live life as they see fit?

So the reason Indian tribes have survived and are today making a strong comeback —a hundred years after everyone thought they would have and should have disappeared— is simply this: Indians want to be Indians, they *must* be Indians, because our way of life is too good, too valuable, too important to let die.

The Blackfeet have a complex system of beliefs, some of which today may be as much unconscious as conscious. For example, in the past we avoided eating fish or using canoes because we believe that rivers and lakes hold special power through habitation of Underwater People called the *Suyitapis.* The Suyitapis are the power source for medicine bundles, painted lodge covers, and other sacred items.

So even today, a traditional disdain for fishing persists for many. We have some of the largest trout in the world in Duck Lake and other lakes and rivers, but it is visitors moreso than Tribal members that do the fishing. And we have the most amazing and inviting lakes anywhere, right next to Glacier Park, but you won't find many of us on the water in boats.

Though we now generally live in houses to shield us from our brutal winters, most families have large tipis that are built to a standard size and traditional design. Visit our huge, annual summer powwow called North American Indian Days and you will see an endless sea of tipis, all about the same height and diameter. Painted tipis are sacred, each has a story and unique identity, may not copied or replicated, and can only be transferred by way of an elaborate ritual.

In the past, tipis were made from 8 to 20 buffalo hides. Today we use a heavy cloth because buffalos, like us, are making a comeback and a large number of hides are still hard to come by. In the past, about 19 pine poles, each averaging 18 feet in length, comprised a tipi's frame. That is pretty much the same today. We still prefer the strong and distinctive tall-but-thin lodgepole pines that are a found in the high elevations and short growing seasons of the Rockies.

True to our tradition of hunting buffalo, and later hunting elk and raising beef, red meat is a staple for us. We also still love dried meat prepared in the old ways. In the past, fish, reptiles, and grizzly bears were, except for a few bands, considered unfit for consumption. We still don't eat much fish or bear.

Our traditional music as played today is similar to many other tribes: drumming and singing. Traditionally, we used two types of drums. For the Sun Dance we used a section of tree trunk with skin stretched over both ends, much like the drums you see at powwows today. We also used something resembling a tambourine with hide stretched over a broad wooden hoop. Various types of rattles made of hides or buffalo hides were also used for various ceremonies. Whistles were also used in the Sun Dance.

In the past we made our clothing from the hides of buffalo, deer, elk, and antelope. Women tailored dresses for themselves from durable and pliable skins of antelope or mountain sheep. These dresses were usually ankle length and sleeveless, held up by straps, and decorated with cut fringes, porcupine quills, and geometric designs. After the traders came in the 18th century, glass beads were used to decorate clothing and other items. Women also wore necklaces of sweet-grass and bracelets of elk or deer teeth. Moccasins and (in winter) long buffalo robes, often decorated with earthen or plant dyes and elaborate porcupine quill embroidery, were worn by men and women.

Men wore antelope or mountain sheep leggings, shirts and breechcloths. They wore necklaces made from the claws and teeth of bears and from braided sweet grass. This dress was common among Blackfoot men until the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Today when you visit North American Indian Days or any traditional gathering on the Blackfeet Reservation, you will find us in our finest, most splendid clothing and costumes. You will see fine and fancy traditional Blackfeet dress as well as multi-tribal designs made purposefully to compete in the powwow circuit. And you'll see an array of more modern clothing infused with

traditional elements and ornamentation.

In the past, we had numerous dance societies, each having a social and religious function. Dances reflected our emphasis on hunting and war and were usually held in summer. Members were honored in the dances for bravery, skill, or generosity. The Sun Dance was an annual sacred celebration of the sun, occurring in mid-summer. It was initiated by the “vow woman,” a virtuous woman who vowed to take on the responsibilities of sponsoring the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance required the construction of a special circular lodge, and involved men fasting and praying, and dancing from the wall to a central pole and back inside the lodge. The Sun Dance lasted four days, and voluntary piercing of the chest for ritual purposes was sometimes a concluding feature of the dance.

Medicine bundles continue to be a central part of our ceremonial and spiritual life. These bundles were originally wrapped in rawhide, but today may be wrapped in cloth or hide. They usually contain the things needed to perform a particular ceremony or ritual, for example tobacco, pipe, paint, sweetgrass, beaver hide, war shirt, knife, lance, or other items. When treated in certain ways, these bundles have the power needed to perform our most important and spiritual ceremonies. Medicine bundles and the power they contain are commonly passed from one person to another in an elaborate ceremony when the time is right to do so.

We continue to practice many of the ancient ways, including the sweat lodge and vision quest, which involves fasting to make oneself weak in a remote place such as Chief Mountain, where we await a vision.

Our language is making a resurgence, with numerous educational institutions on the reservation providing instruction. Ours is primarily an oral tradition but we have always kept a record of Tribal history and events by painting tipis, robes, and hides with pictures to tell the story, something we do to this day. Hides painted to record the year’s significant occurrences are called a winter count, and you will find winters counts mentioned in the “Historical Timeline” section of this website. Perhaps it is our tradition of visual imagery that explains why the Blackfeet have such an unusually large number of talented, internationally-celebrated artists.

Today many Blackfeet are Christians, but that doesn’t conflict with our ancient sense of spirituality and the supernatural. "All of the Blackfeet universe," Malcolm McFee stated in *Mod ern Blackfeet*
“was invested with a pervasive supernatural power that could be met within the natural

environment."

We have always sought these powers, believing the life of the land and our own lives were irrevocably bound and intertwined. We hope that an animal's power or the power of a natural element will be bestowed upon us in a dream. The animal, often appearing in human form, might provide us with a list of the objects, songs, and rituals necessary to use this power. Then we should gather the objects into a medicine bundle and do what we have been told to do to avail ourselves and others of the power.

All this may sound strange to you, but to a Blackfeet standing on the reservation it would sound stranger to suggest there is *not* a supernatural power running through us and everything around us. We feel it, and perhaps you will too when you come to visit.

This excerpt from the trailtribes.org website sums it up:

“The world of the Blackfeet , their entire universe, is inhabited by good and evil spirits. The realm of the supernatural is accepted as a significant part of everyday life, without the need to analyze or rationalize it. They believe in the "Sun Power" as the source of all power. It is everywhere; in the mountains, lakes, rivers, birds, and wild animals, and this power can be transferred to people. The gift, usually in the form of songs, comes through the medium of some animal, bird, or supernatural being, whose pity for the person comes when the person demonstrates his need through fasting. The songs received are means to contact the spirit powers. The power bestowed can heal the sick, help the tribe, or bring success in war. Today, the Blackfeet belief in the spirit world remains strong.”