Niitsítapi

(we are…the Original People)

With 16,000 enrolled members, we are the largest Indian tribe in Montana and one of the largest tribes in the United States. Many more claim Blackfeet ancestry: In the 2000 census, 85,750 people identified themselves as having Blackfeet heritage.

Our rugged, picturesque 1.5 million acre (3,000 square mile) reservation in Montana has a population of about 10,000, including 8,500 enrolled Blackfeet, several hundred Blackfeet descendents and Indians from other tribes, and a few hundred non-Indians. The other 7,500 Tribal members are scattered all over the world.

Our largest town and seat of government is Browning (population 3,500, including surrounding areas). Other towns include Heart Butte, Blackfoot, Starr School, Babb, Saint Mary, Kiowa, and East Glacier. Away from our towns, many areas have population densities of less than 1 person per 5 or 10 square miles.

In the old days we were hunters, raiders, and warriors. The buffalo was our main source of food and we were the best horsemen on the Great Plains. We are still expert horsemen, but the buffalo were exterminated by white hunters by the 1880s, which nearly led to our extinction, as well. Over time we have become ranchers (many of whom have brought the buffalo back in large numbers), farmers, artists, scholars, writers, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, soldiers, administrators, scientists, government leaders, engineers, managers, entrepreneurs and whatever else we could do to survive, contribute to our community, and protect and preserve our reservation and way of life. Today you will find Blackfeet in all walks of life, on the reservation and around the world. We have an array of Tribally-owned and Tribal-member owned businesses on the reservation and off, and we are aggressively starting new businesses and training our people for new careers.

We were great before, perhaps the greatest of all tribes if greatness is measured by being complete masters of a huge and hostile domain. And we absolutely believe our true greatness is still yet to come. In better days, we were called “the Lords of the Plains.” George Catlin in his seminal 1866 book *The North American Indian* said the Blackfeet are “perhaps the most

powerful tribe in North America." We didn't rise to the position by chance or favor: we did it through strength of will, boldness, toughness, an absolute unwillingness to lose, and love of family and tribe. We still possess these traits, and that is what will make us great and proud again.

But make no mistake, we are still struggling to claw our way back from near-extinction and one of the rawest deals any group of humans ever forced on any other group. For a few decades, we were stunned by our losses, confinement, and being prohibited from living the successful and prosperous life we had always lived. In those dark times, maybe we lost our way a little, maybe even lost heart a little. That is behind us. We are stronger in numbers than we have been in 150 years. We know who we are. We know where we must go. We know what we must do to get there. And we are doing it.

We call ourselves "Blackfeet" (or Pikuni or Southern Piegan) whereas "Blackfoot" usually refers to our three Canadian counterparts that share our origins, language, and culture: The Northern Piegan, the Kainai Nation, and the Siksika Nation. Collectively, our four nations form the Blackfoot Confederacy or Niitsítapi (meaning "original people"). But you can call us Blackfeet or Blackfoot, and Pikuni (pronounced pih–kuhn–ee) or Piegan (pronounced pay-gone) is even better.

Our home, which was once larger than Montana but is today the size of Delaware, is bordered by Canada to the north, Glacier Park and the Rockies to the west, and prairie and wilderness to the south and east. Much of our reservation looks a lot like rolling prairie elsewhere, but there is a difference. Since we are in the foothills of the Rockies, our average elevation is over 4,000' and that makes the growing season short and our weather extreme and mercurial. Some folks might find it too cold and windy or hot and windy to make this their first choice for year-round living.

But we wouldn't live anywhere else. Of the 564 tribes in the United States, the Blackfeet Tribe is one of only 6 tribes that still lives on ancestral lands. We believe that we have always lived here, and recent archaeological discoveries show that we have indeed been on this land for thousands of years.

Thus, our relationship with the land runs deeper and stronger than most people can understand or appreciate. The land does not belong to us, we belong to it. It is forever and we as individuals are here only for an instant. The land shapes who we are and how we think. For a

Blackfeet Indian, regardless of where in the world they live, “home” means the Blackfeet Reservation.

Unlike so many tribes near cities or in locations that attract large numbers of non-members, the remoteness and seasonal inaccessibility of our reservation has meant that our familial and societal structure has remained intact and strong. We have always lived in an unforgiving, even hostile, environment where everyone needs everyone else to survive. Thousands of years relying in countless ways on each other, with no one else around, has formed a bond and reverence for family and tribe that is rarely found any more in a modern, rootless world. When a Blackfeet meets another Blackfeet for the first time, the conversation quickly turns to “who is your father and mother, who are your grandparents?”

Perhaps the most important defining trait of the Blackfeet is generosity. This might seem odd for a people long known for aggressive ferocity in war and conquest and for, sadly, today having so many members struggling with the economic and social problems typical of all large, isolated reservations. But there is no inconsistency: Indians everywhere seem to have a genetic disposition to generosity, and that trait runs especially strong with the Blackfeet.

Now that you know a little more about us, don’t you think you should come visit?