Ahwahsiin

THE LAND/WHERE WE GET OUR FOOD

Traditional Ecological Knowledge and
Contemporary Food Sovereignty
on the Blackfeet Reservation

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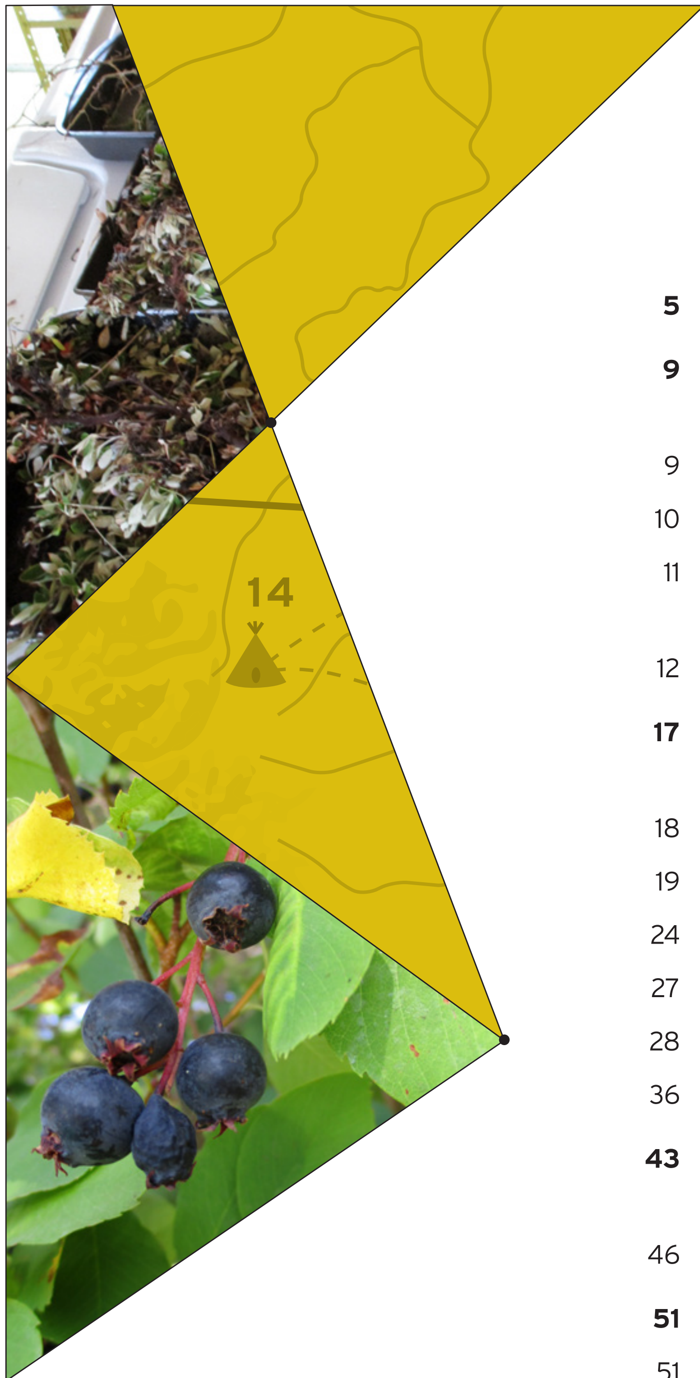

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introduction

Indigenous peoples throughout the world have an intimate relationship with their environment. Indeed, it is perhaps this relationship that makes indigenous peoples most distinct from other ethnic groups. Historically, colonization has included stripping indigenous peoples from this relationship. In a world that continues to globalize - to share ideas, cultures, and economies - and in a world that faces the undeniable violence of global warming, the preservation of this knowledge is urgently needed. As a recent United Nations report noted, "Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and food systems are fast disappearing but are of the utmost importance, not only for sustaining Indigenous Peoples but also for providing alternative paradigms for coping with diverse ecosystems in a changing global environment".

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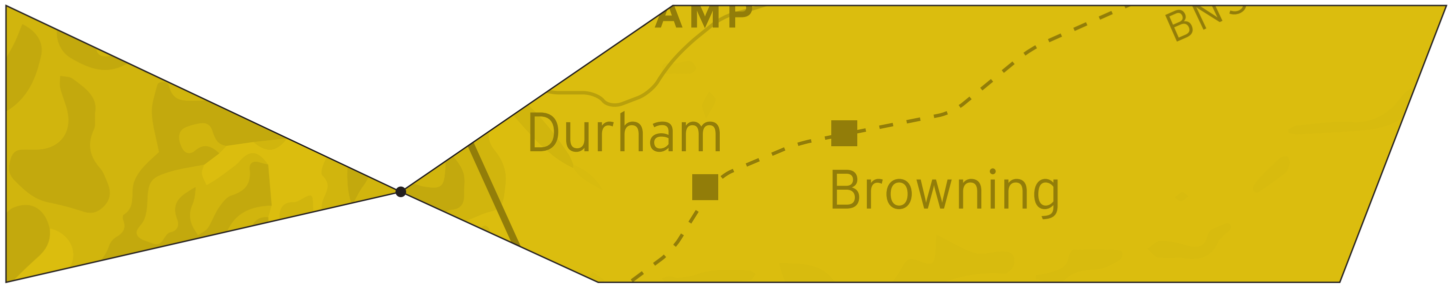
>
> FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS[1]

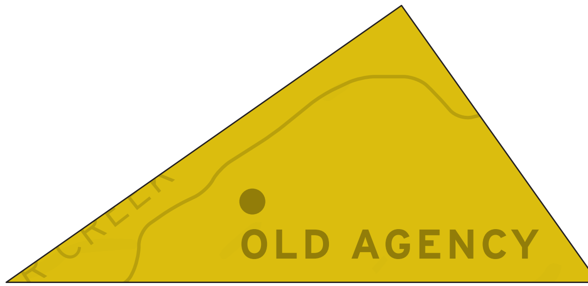
The preservation of indigenous ecological knowledge and food systems is essential for cultural revitalization, addressing community health disparities, and indeed, to address climate change. Unfortunately, indigenous peoples' knowledge is rapidly disappearing and is poorly documented.

Opposite: *A prairie scene with sagebrush in eastern Montana during mid-summer.*



This research is an effort to combat and counteract that loss of knowledge. This research examines Blackfeet tribal food systems. These food systems, though damaged through centuries of violence, are not lost. Community members still pick berries, use root medicine, and hunt in traditional ways. However, many of those who possess traditional knowledge are getting older. Additionally, a changing environment - due to climate change, resource extraction, large scale agriculture and more - means that now is a significant time to preserve and protect our traditional ecological knowledge. This is knowledge that is meant to be passed down and shared; it literally keeps our people alive.

In this vein, the research is meant to be not only an oral history of Blackfeet foods, but a guide on how to use them. We used research of existing literature and interviews with contemporary community members who maintain this knowledge. This is both to preserve elders' traditional knowledge, and revitalize it for future generations. We hope that this oral history research and report is the beginning of more projects on traditional food sovereignty on the Blackfeet reservation and in other Indigenous communities.



part one

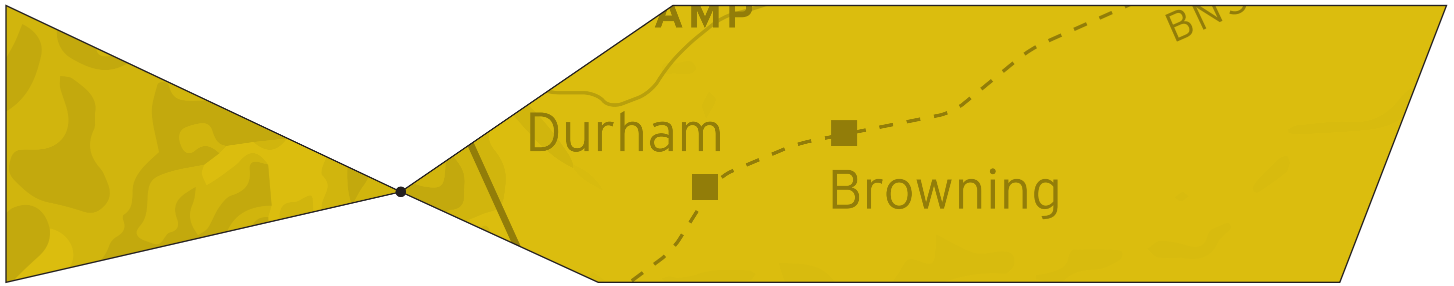
American Indian Health Status and Traditional Food Systems

Angeline Wall cleaning roots.

WHAT IS THE HEALTH STATUS OF AMERICAN INDIANS?

Native Americans throughout the United States face health disparities due to a variety of intersecting reasons – histories of land loss and cultural suppression; contemporary lack of access to inexpensive, healthy foods and reliable health care, among other issues. Nutrition-based ailments are especially prevalent. According to the Indian Health Clinical Reporting system, over 80% of American Indian/Alaska Native adults are overweight or obese and an estimated 45% to 51% of American Indian children are obese. If these trends continue, it is predicted that half of American Indian children will develop Type 2 diabetes in their lifetimes.[2] Though diabetes is pervasive in many Native American families today, including many Blackfeet families, it did not in fact emerge as a prominent disorder in Indian Country until the 1950s.[3] In a 2016 study by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, adult obesity in Glacier County (where much of

***Opposite:** Alum root awaiting preparation.*



the Blackfeet Reservation is located) was 34%, compared to 25% in Montana as a whole. Additionally, 14% of adults in Glacier County had diabetes compared to 9% in Montana.[4] Because of this and other health indicators throughout Indian Country, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that American Indians lag 20 to 25 years behind the general population in health status.

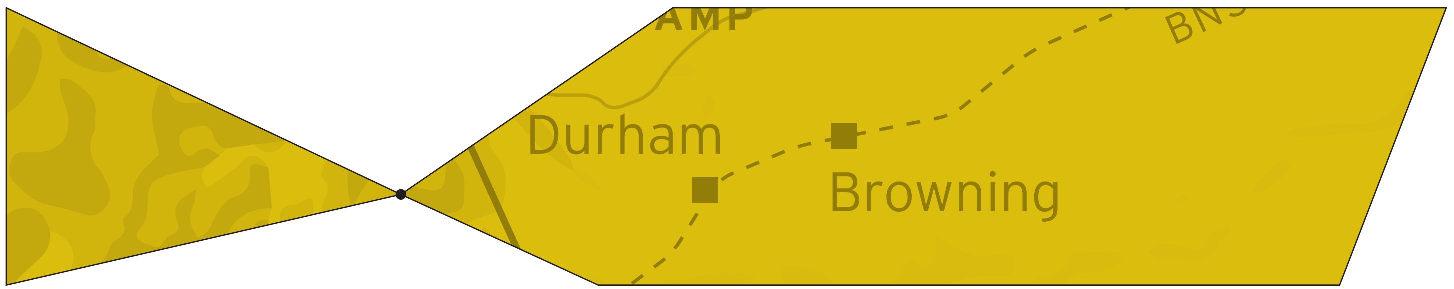
DEPENDENCE ON THE U.S. GOVERNMENT FOR FOOD

Traditionally, food acquisition among the Blackfeet was a very active process. Traditional food preparation and access changed dramatically with colonization and Western expansion of the United States. Indeed, poor access to nutritional foods in reservation communities has a long history. When tribes were relocated to reservations or removed from their traditional lands, the rations they bought from the U.S. government had much lower nutritional value compared to their traditional diets. It is important to emphasize that rations were bought by the Blackfeet with their own money - they were not freely distributed by the U.S. government. As rations continued to penetrate and dominate the community, traditional foods were slowly replaced by settler foods.[5] Rations were later replaced by food stamps and other U.S. government food distribution systems, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR, also called "commodities"). On the Blackfeet Reservation, seven different federal food programs operate, including: SNAP, FDPIR, the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program (for students), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (for children, elders, or mentally/physically

disabled adults in non-residential day-care settings), and the BackPack Program (which provides food that students can take home on weekends). Even with these programs, it is difficult to obtain nutritious foods on the reservation. A Feeding America study found that the food insecurity rate on the Blackfeet Reservation was 21%, higher than both the Montana and national rates.[6] Additionally, according to the USDA definition, nearly all of Indian Country resides within a food desert, meaning that a grocery story is twenty or more miles away in rural areas (like reservations) or ten or more miles away in urban areas.[7] The Blackfeet reservation for example, which has 1.5 million acres of land and is larger than the state of Delaware, only has two real grocery stores (Glacier Family Foods, run by the tribe, and IGA), and a variety of convenience stores.

FOOD SYSTEMS AND COLONIZATION ON THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

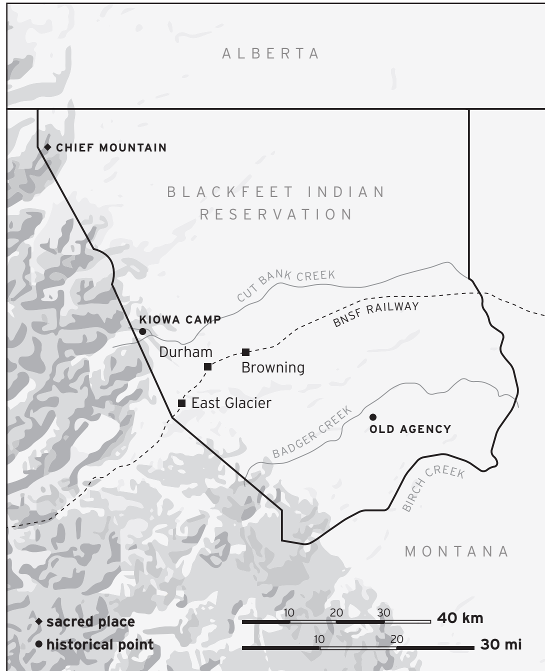
The Blackfeet are a historically powerful tribe that controlled a vast stretch of land throughout (what is now) Montana and Alberta. The Blackfeet have had a close relationship with their environment from before colonization through today. Bison were used for food, shelter, clothing, bowls, pillows, and other material purposes. Similarly, the Blackfeet used more than 200 types of plants for medicine, food, and material purposes. The Blackfeet, like many tribes in the region, were semi-sedentary. They lived six months of each year in winter in villages and six months of each summer hunting and gathering food. Tribes were nomadic and bison hunters because that lifestyle best worked with their surrounding climate. The Blackfeet typically had four camps, reflecting the seasons and food needs: winter camp, spring hunting and root gathering camp, summer hunting and Sundance camp, and fall hunting and berry gathering camp.[8] They lived in family



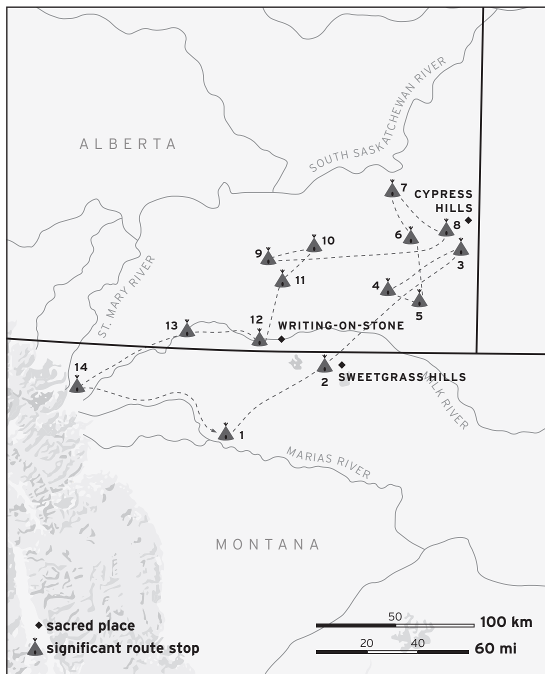
groups or bands of up to 200 people. During the summer, however, they became large communities, sometimes up to one thousand strong. Though a short growing season and a harsh climate eliminated agriculture as a food source, they had deep knowledge of the environment and often returned to the same location year after year to gather specific plants or hunt in specific areas.[9] Because of this profound management of their ecosystem and through trade, tribes in the Great Plains region such as the Blackfeet likely had an over-abundance of food throughout many periods of history.[10]

THE BLACKFEET, COLONIZATION, AND CHANGING ACCESS TO FOOD

The first American colonizers to not only arrive but stay in Blackfeet territory were missionaries, primarily from the Catholic church. At first, the main impact was economic. Blackfeet wealth increased, and different technology brought by Americans were incorporated into Blackfeet life. For example, metal knives improved their ability to kill and process bison. Because of their strength in the region, the Blackfeet maintained agency in interacting with the Jesuits, a sect of the Catholic church. The Jesuits were interested in two main tasks: converting the Blackfeet, and assimilating them to American lifestyles. Before there was a strong American military presence in the region, the Blackfeet were able to take what they liked from the Jesuits, but viewed them through a Blackfeet cultural lens. They took what they found useful of Christianity - what they thought would benefit them - but maintained their Blackfeet spirituality and beliefs. Some Blackfeet willingly converted to Christianity.



The Blackfeet Reservation in 2017.

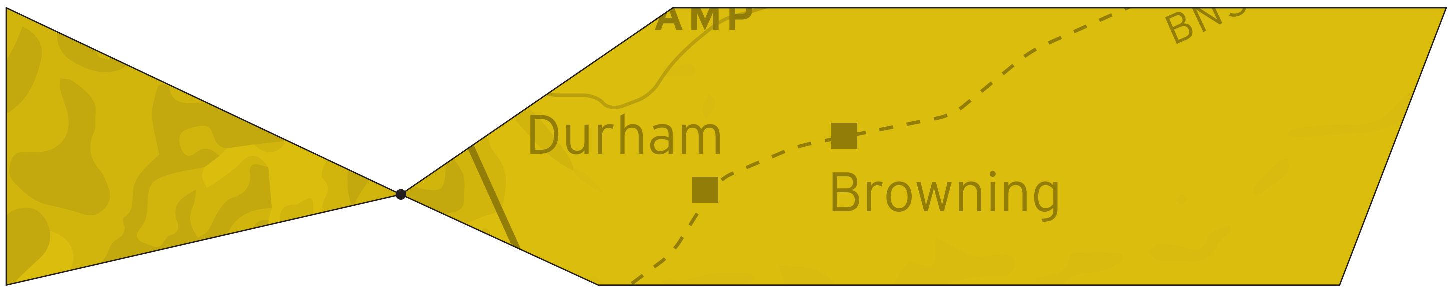


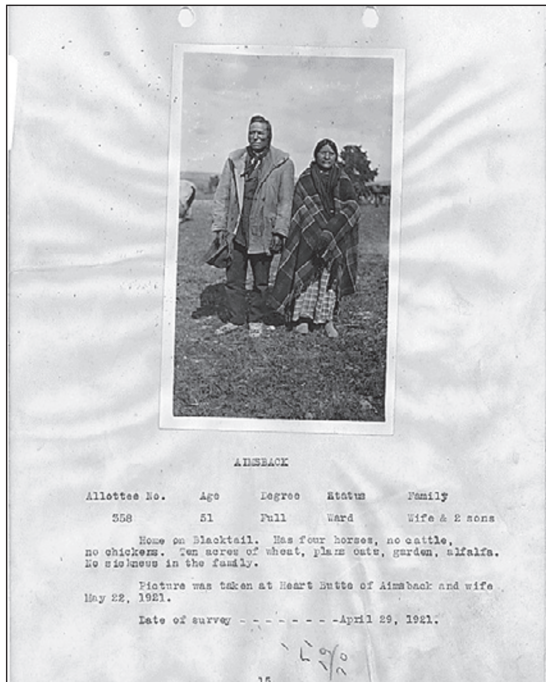
A traditional seasonal round route.

In addition to conversions, the Jesuits sought culture changes. They encouraged the Blackfeet to become farmers, despite their success as nomadic peoples and profound ecological knowledge. The Jesuits were more interested in the Blackfeet adapting to American cultural norms. They were interested in converting the Blackfeet to an agricultural lifestyle for three chief reasons. First, they believed agriculture was superior to nomadic lifestyles. Secondly, they thought it would decrease war between the Blackfeet and the Salish, as being stationary would decrease competition over hunting territory. Finally, a permanent sedentary life would make conversions and social control easier for the Jesuits. Similar to Christianity, the Blackfeet took what they found useful with farming and ignored the rest. Because leafy vegetables were not part of their traditional diet, they fed these plants to their horses. Instead, they opted to grow root vegetables, like those they were accustomed to eating, such as carrots, potatoes, and onions.[11]

Throughout the early Catholic mission's existence in Blackfeet country, the Blackfeet were able to maintain their cultural ways. They took what they wanted of Christianity - access to supernatural Power, a tenet of Blackfeet spirituality, and what they wanted of agriculture - the ability to grow root vegetables, but maintained their strong culture and communities. After the 1870s, however, various federal policies, and the spread of starvation, disease, and liquor had a massive impact on Blackfeet society.

In the 1870s, American colonial violence and hostility increased between the American settlers and the Blackfeet. The Blackfeet territorial boundaries were initially defined by the United States through the 1855 Lame Bull's Treaty, and were equivalent in size to about half of what is now the state of Montana. In 1865, a treaty with the Blackfeet was never ratified by Congress, so food annuities never





AIMSBACK

Allottee No.	Age	Degree	Status	Family
358	51	Full	Ward	Wife & 2 sons

Home on Blacktail. Has four horses, no cattle, no chickens. Ten acres of wheat, plan oats, garden, alfalfa. No sickness in the family.

Picture was taken at Heart Butte of Aimsback and wife May 22, 1921.

Date of survey - - - - - - - - -April 29, 1921.

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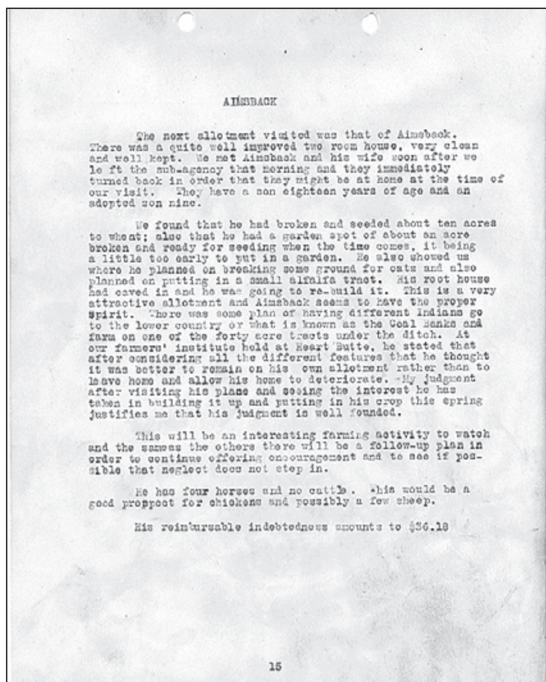


AIMSBACK

The next allotment visited was that of Aimsback. There was a quite well improved two room house, very clean and well kept. We met Aimsback and his wife soon after we left the sub-agency that morning and they immediately turned back in order that they might be at home at the time of our visit. They have a son eighteen years of age and an adopted son nine.

We found that he had broken and seeded about ten acres to wheat; also that he had a garden spot of about an acre broken and ready for seeding when the time comes, it being a little too early to put in a garden. He also showed us where he planned on breaking some ground for oats and also planned on putting in a small alfalfa tract. His root house had caved in and he was going to re-build it. This is a very attractive allotment and Aimsback seems to have the proper spirit. There was some plan of having different Indians go to the lower country or what is known as the Coal Banks and farm on one of the forty acre tracts under the ditch. At our farmers' institute held at Heart Butte, he stated that after considering all the different features that he thought it was better to remain on his own allotment rather than to leave home and allow his home to deteriorate. My judgment after visiting his place and seeing the interest he has taken in building it up and putting in his crop this spring justifies me that his judgment is well founded.

This will be an interesting farming activity to watch and the sameas the others there will be a follow-up plan in order to continue offering encouragement and to see if possible that neglect does not step in.

He has four horses and no cattle. This would be a good proppect for chickens and possibly a few sheep.

His reimbursable indebtedness amounts to $36.18

15

Blackfeet Industrial Survey, 1921, Aimsback and Hollering in the Air.

arrived. Within the next twenty years, the decline of bison and the spread of disease contributed to hunger among tribal members, and nearly three thousand Blackfeet were dependent on U.S. government rations that were purchased with Blackfeet money. John Young, their Indian agent, wrote to Congress to ask for more rations, as they were not receiving nearly enough. However, Congress did not provide an increase of help. The winter of 1883 to 1884 is known as Starvation Winter by the Blackfeet, during which about 25% of Blackfeet died from starvation and associated diseases. Despite this, Blackfeet cultural traditions remained.

Blackfeet territory was further decreased when gold was discovered in the mountains near the reservation, in what is now Glacier National Park. By 1895, the tribe agreed to sell the land to the government, but many tribal representatives refused to sign the agreement. There is some dispute as to whether the Blackfeet believed they were *selling* the land to the government, or merely leasing it.[12] Though Glacier National Park is a relatively small tract of land (about 20 miles wide), many traditional Blackfeet foods and medicines are collected there. Today, tribal members continue to use Glacier Park as a plant gathering place.

The 1887 General Allotment Act, also called the "Dawes Act," had deep impacts on Blackfeet society. It was enacted on the Blackfeet reservation from 1907-1912. The Allotment Act was meant to diminish tribal land holding and replace it with individual land holding. Tribal members were meant to develop the land for agricultural purposes. Thus, this law acted to not only divide reservations into smaller and smaller portions, favoring individual land ownership over traditional, communal ownership, but also attacked traditional lifeways by encouraging agriculture over gathering and hunting.

Detail of Aimsback and Hollering in the Air.

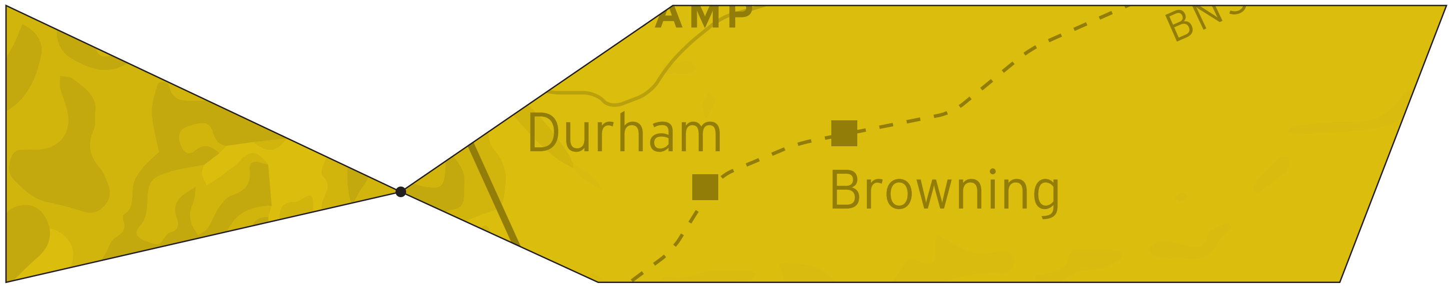
It is important to highlight this history and these specific government policies, because they directly contribute to the demise of Blackfeet food systems and Blackfeet health. For centuries, the Blackfeet had a deep relationship and knowledge of their ecosystem. This was taken away in a relatively short period of time: their territory shrunk, decreasing access to all plants they used; their land was "checker-boarded" and they were encouraged to be farmers; and their religion, language, and culture were repeatedly suppressed by the U.S. government and Christian church. While dependence on the land and access to and use of traditional foods dramatically decreased, it is important to note that this knowledge was never "lost." People today continue to gather foods and hunt traditionally, though it is now often a supplement to their diet, providing a healthy supplement to their store-bought food.

part two
Traditional Foods in Contemporary Blackfeet Society

For this project, we interviewed nine Blackfeet community members. We addressed three primary questions with our interviewees: What foods did you eat growing up? How has food preparation and access changed since your childhood? What would you like to see on the Blackfeet Reservation in the future, in terms of food preparation and access? From these interviews, several key themes emerged: traditional foods were and are still used by members of the Blackfeet community; modifications to the use of traditional foods were made based on income and accessibility; kinship and community togetherness were important factors during their childhoods in ensuring people were fed; and traditional food use and community sharing of food has decreased since their childhoods.

We interviewed two generations of community members. Irene, Angeline, Bernadette, and Frank grew up in the 1940s and 1950s. Margaret, Becky, Debbie, Glen, and Eli are of the next generation, who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. Those we interviewed grew up in different circumstances than many people on the reservation today. Irene and Angeline, for example, spent their childhood in canvas tents, a sheep tent, and a walled tent in various places in the country on the reservation before moving into a small house in the town of Browning. When they were living in the country, they did not have electricity or running water, and thus most of their food – including meat, guts, berries, and roots – was dried to be stored throughout the year. Frank grew up in Durham, an area in the country between East Glacier and Browning. He grew up hunting, gardening, and picking berries. Bernadette grew up in a small house in the town of Browning, and spent a lot of time learning about medicinal plants and the Blackfeet language from her mother, whom she lived with until her mother passed away a few years ago. Margaret, Becky, Debbie, Eli, and Glen grew up mostly in the town of Browning and other areas

Opposite: *Bernadette Wall (left) and Angeline Wall (right) collecting roots.*



on the reservation, eating foods distributed by the Federal Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR or commodities) and foods that they and their family hunted or picked.

Despite historic attempts - intentional or unintentional - to remove Blackfeet people from the land and from their traditional food systems, people maintain this knowledge. Sometimes, these foods are used in new ways. For example, berries were used in muffins instead of berry soup or pemmican, or cow guts were used instead of bison guts. We can view this hybridity of traditional foods as both a product of food accessibility and a reaction to changing political and geographical environments while maintaining a cultural lens.

> "A great deal of human energy must be expended to dry foods: the fruits, vegetables, and berries must be gathered in the wild; the game must be hunted or trapped; the foods must be prepared for drying. All of these activities provide healthy exercise."
>
> BETTY GEISHIRT, WICAZO SA REVIEW[13]

WHAT FOODS WERE EATEN?

In the interviews, the most commonly discussed foods were berries, guts and fat of animals, and medicinal plants and teas. We will evaluate how these foods were gathered, prepared, and eaten. We hope this information can be used by Indigenous or Blackfeet families to integrate - or increase - the use of traditional foods. In addition to the fact that traditionally gathered and prepared foods are healthier alternatives to processed foods prevalent on the

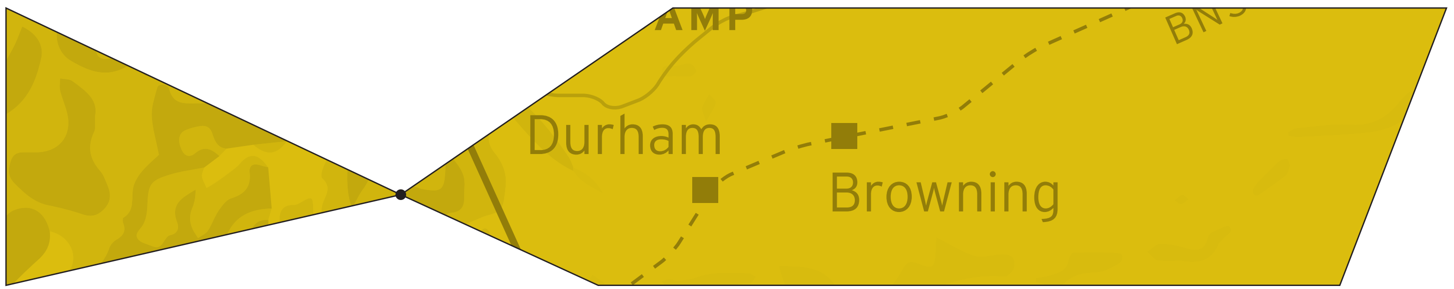
reservation, there are other health benefits. One scholar notes of Great Plains tribes: “A great deal of human energy must be expended to dry foods: the fruits, vegetables, and berries must be gathered in the wild; the game must be hunted or trapped; the foods must be prepared for drying. All of these activities provide healthy exercise.”[13]

This should also undergird the importance of environmental preservation and activism. If lands in Blackfeet Territory are not protected from oil exploitation or large-scale agriculture (which stresses the soil), this cultural knowledge will be forever lost, and deeply impact those people who continue to eat these foods and use these medicines. We hope this inspires others to revitalize this knowledge and strive for a healthier community.

BERRY PICKING

Berries were one of the most commonly gathered foods by those we interviewed, and are prominent in Blackfeet cuisine in both sweet and more tart versions. The most commonly collected berries among our interviewees were: sarvis berries (also called service berries, June berries, or Saskatoon berries), gooseberries, and chokecherries. Picking huckleberries was not mentioned. This may surprise some, as huckleberry products are a common commodity, particularly in Montana tourist locales. However, the Blackfeet historically used huckleberries for medicinal purposes. Huckleberry leaves can be brewed into tea and used for medicine, but the Blackfeet did not historically eat the berry itself.

Angeline and Irene reflected that as children, their mother would make them fill two fifty pound bags with berries they picked. Sometimes, their mother would go on multi-day trips specifically to pick berries. They remembered



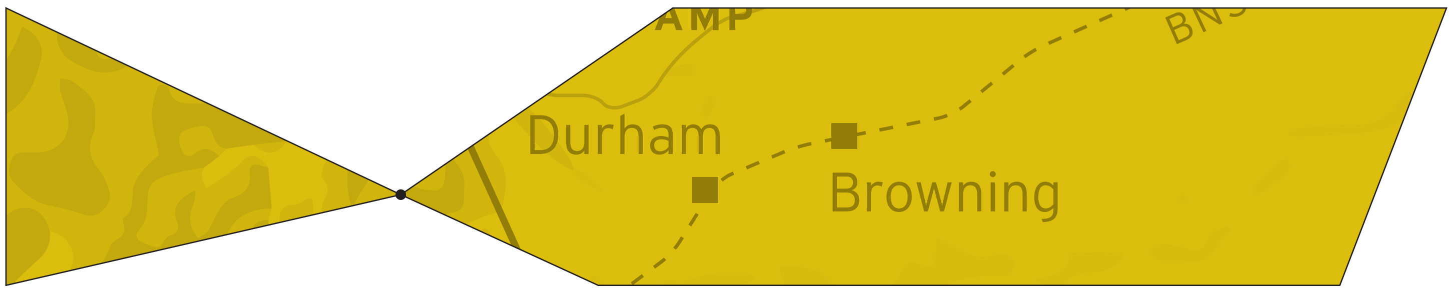
picking berries near Kiowa Camp and Cut Bank Creek on the reservation. Some berries they would eat fresh, but primarily they would dry them to use throughout the winter. The berries could later be cooked into patties, boiled into soup, added to bread, or made into pemmican (mixed with fat). Berries can be dried on a canvas cloth or in a pan outside, checking on them and turning them a few times. It takes a few days to dry berries. They should be stored in a cool place and can be kept throughout the year. Irene reflected on the process for grinding and preparing berries:

> "They had two kinds of rocks (to mash the berries) so you don't chip them. You would crush the chokecherries just as fine as you could get them. Then after you crushed them, they'd make patties out of them and lay them out . . . on a canvas, and dry them. Then when it came to eating them they'd put them in a bowl, soak water over them for a long time until they fell apart, and it wasn't really watery but moist enough. Then you could put fat in the oven, render it and dice it up, and just take the fat, not the grease, and put it in the chokecherries and a little sugar."

Frank, who is the same generation as Angeline and Irene, similarly remembered the strong presence of traditionally gathered berries in his childhood. Though he had few memories of picking them, he remembered the adults would mash chokecherries with a rock, make them into patties, and dry them on racks. Irene's family used the same method of drying as Frank's. Similarly, his family used these patties to make berry soup in the winter. They would mix the dried berries with dried meat and tallow (a rendered form of beef or sheep fat). He has fond memories of the drying patties, and remembered trying to steal them off the drying rack as a child to snack on.

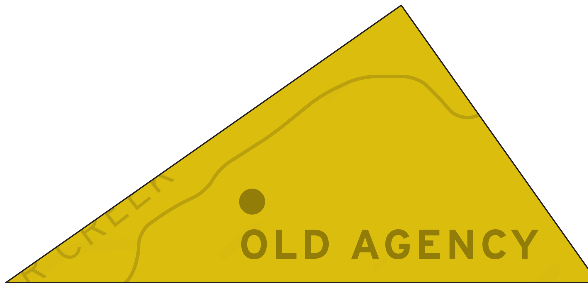
Margaret, a generation younger than Frank, Irene, and Angeline, grew up with her grandparents. During her childhood, she remembers eating berry soup topped with fat cracklins when elders visited her grandparents. Today, she and her grandchildren continue to collect large quantities of berries. She uses modern technology and freezes them for use throughout the winter. However, she uses them in more contemporary cooking: she usually adds them to muffins or pancakes. She said she rarely makes berry soup, but will donate some of her frozen berries for berry soup in the winter if a community member is doing a Blackfeet ceremony or funeral in the winter. On preparation of berries, Becky noted: "There is a traditional way, where you boil beef tongue and you make it with the broth. That's the way when they do these ceremonies, these Sundances or sweats… they boil that tongue, and that's what they cook the berries in."

Huckleberries.



As children, Margaret, Becky and Debbie picked berries with their family, but didn't travel very far to do so because they didn't have a car. They typically picked sarvis berries and gooseberries in the hills south of Browning. Margaret said they also sometimes went to Big Badger or Two Medicine to pick berries.

In addition to berries, they ate apples from Washington state, which their aunt who was a migrant farm worker would bring back to the reservation after picking season was over. Margaret noted: "They'd bring (the apples) to needy families, and we got a lot…they brought them to Heart Butte, to Two Medicine, and they'd bring them up here (to Browning)."



Selecting huckleberries (top) and preparing sarvis berries (bottom).

BERRY SOUP RECIPE

Berry soup can be eaten as a side dish at many meals. If the berries are frozen they can be eaten throughout the year. This recipe calls for sarvis berries, which a person can pick throughout the Blackfeet Reservation, in Glacier National Park (Blackfeet members only) and in other areas of Montana.

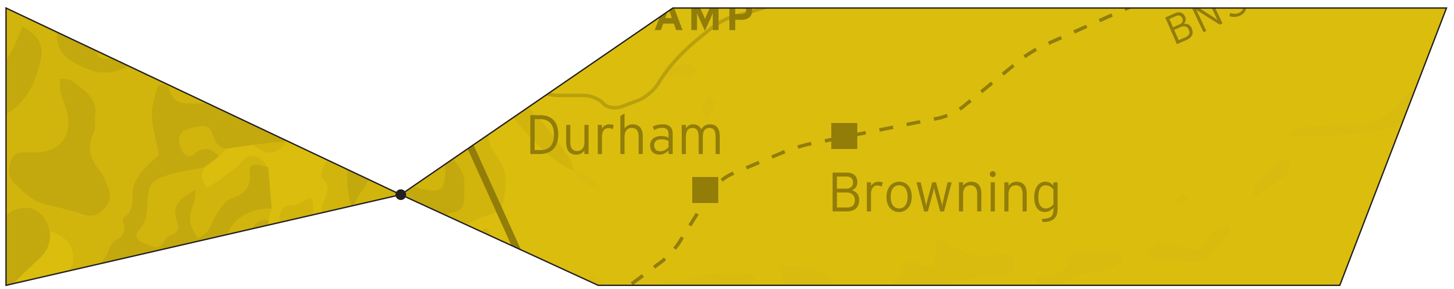
If sarvis berries are unavailable, blueberries will work. Sarvis berries have a distinct, mealy texture and slightly bitter taste.

Before electricity and refrigeration, the Blackfeet would dry berries and other plants to use later. Many of those we interviewed remembered their families doing this during their childhoods.

Old Version: Boil 6 cups sarvis berries with about 2–4 cups of bison or deer broth. Camas root can be boiled with the soup to add sweetener. They used to smash about half the berries to make the soup thicker.

Common Version: Boil 6 cups sarvis berries with about 1 cup sugar, 1/2 cup flour, and 2–4 cups water. Smash the berries after they are cooked to thicken the soup.

Sugar Free Version: Boil 6 cups sarvis berries and one can of frozen concentrate 100% juice (cherry or apple are best). Smash the berries after they're cooked to thicken the soup.



VEGETABLES AND GARDENING

Historically, the Blackfeet primarily ate root vegetables that were available in their territory. The Blackfeet traditionally ate root vegetables such as wild carrots, wild onions, prairie turnips, and biscuit root. Wild carrots are similar to carrots you can buy in the store but sweeter; wild onions taste similar to store-bought white onions but are smaller. Margaret grew up picking wild carrots, wild onions, and prairie turnips; Bernadette picked biscuit root with her mother for medicinal purposes. Within the last few generations however, these traditional root vegetables have primarily been replaced by non-local root vegetables: white potatoes, carrots, and onions. This was in part due to the fact that these foods were grown as part of American enforced farming programs.

> "… we would grow our own vegetables in the summer and put them in the cellar, they'd last till winter."

During the reservation years though, instead of gathering root vegetables, gardening was prevalent on the Blackfeet reservation, according to those interviewed. As a child, Frank's family had a garden. He grew up in Durham, between East Glacier and Browning. He noted, "we would grow our own vegetables in the summer and put them in the cellar, they'd last till winter." His father grew potatoes, rutabagas, turnips, carrots, and lettuce. Similar to the collection of berries, his family accumulated as many vegetables as possible to last throughout the year, even when fresh fruits and vegetables were less available.

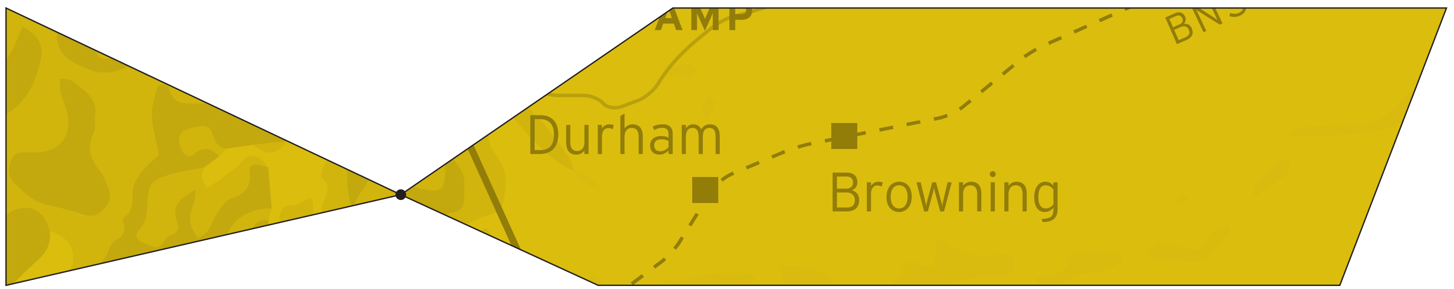
Similarly, Margaret noted that most of the vegetables eaten during her childhood a generation later were homegrown, besides wild onions and wild carrots, which they would pick. She said these vegetables were primarily added to soups. Like Frank, she remembers "we would all help her (grandmother) water the garden, then in the fall we'd pick all the vegetables." Irene, Angeline, and Dimples ate a lot of potatoes during their childhood. Instead of growing theirs, however, they primarily got them in the town of Browning, paid for with stamp books (similar to food stamps, but could be used for other products like shoes or clothes as well).

A YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNITY GARDENING

Danielle Grace Antelope, student at Blackfeet Community College

I am an intern at the Blackfeet Community College for the U.S. Department of Agriculture - People's Market. My job is to put on the People's Markets by organizing, advertising, and setting up canopies and tables on the People Market dates. Instead of a Farmers' Market, we put on People's Market throughout the summer where local entrepreneurs can sell their homemade food, sewing creations, produce, bead work, art work, and other goods with free registration. We provide opportunities for local entrepreneurs to make money as we do not charge the vendors, so all of their profits go to them.

Another important part of my job is to help maintain the greenhouse and tend to the vegetables by watering, weeding, and transplanting.



I work with four other interns. At the greenhouse we have two planting periods, spring and fall. This past spring we grew summer squash, carrots, cabbage, jalapenos, corn, broccoli, green onions, radishes, and peas. We have the greenhouse as well as raised beds outside the greenhouse. We try to grow most of the vegetables inside and outside so we can compare their growth. We found that the squash, carrots, green onions, and broccoli grew larger and more colored in the outside garden. This fall we were unable to plant anything for the fall/winter season as some of our roof pieces are missing from the greenhouse.

At the markets we set up as a vendor with our full grown, picked vegetables to sell at very affordable prices. We also gave away starter plants of what vegetables we have growing at the greenhouse to get more people growing produce throughout the community. Another way we get the community involved is through the free workshops we offer. Each semester the People's Market department offers two to three free workshops that are open to anyone in the community. We have done workshops on entrepreneurial skills, how to make a raised bed, and how to make your own painting canvas.

I recently got a new boss. This spring semester she wants to get us more involved with doing research at the greenhouse, primarily on the Serviceberry plant: how to grow it, where to grow it, and what soil to grow it in. We have talked about learning how to test soils. Additionally, she wants us to look into what nutritional and medicinal properties the

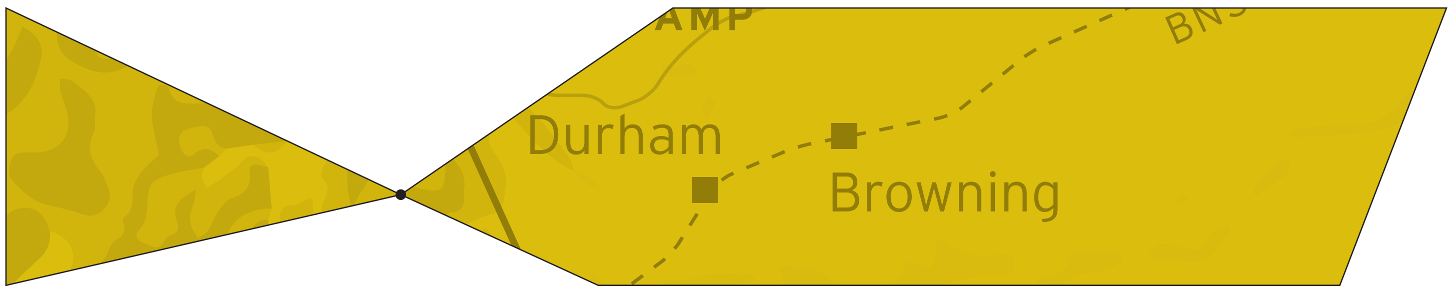
Serviceberry may have. She also wants to grow herbs and traditional plants in the garden. I'm excited for all these new additions to come this semester.

MEATS, GUTS, AND FAT

A common misconception about Plains Indians is that their entire diets were meat, in particular, bison. The romanticized image of the Blackfeet or other Plains Indians riding on horseback, moving their villages to follow bison is ingrained into communal, and indeed national, memory. While bison did play an integral role in Blackfeet life – meat and guts were used for food, their hides for tipis, and their guts stretched to be bags or other material items – it is important to keep in mind as well that the Blackfeet utilized over 200 different plants for food, medicine, and material goods.

For most of those we interviewed, in their lifetimes, meat was more often obtained through hunting than purchasing it in a store. Glen notes, "There was no food stamps, there was no help, so dad pretty much fed us on hunting venison was something we'd eat a lot" and "when other families would be hungry, we'd be eating meat." For the men, hunting was also a deeply social activity, in addition to being a source of food. Frank reflects:

> "I've loved hunting ever since I was a child. We didn't have the money to get us all guns . . . One day I was in the hills down here, and lo and behold there was a plastic bag sticking out of a gopher hole. So I went and pulled the plastic out of the hole and there was a rifle. Talk about fortune."



In fact, the first time he killed something with that gun, he didn't have a knife so he had to drag it miles back to Durham, where he lived. This was also the first time he'd gutted a deer. He and his father would usually hunt deer, elk, lynx, and black bears. In addition to food, they would use the hide of the animals.

Similar to their ancestors, all those interviewed discussed using the whole animal. Even Angeline and Irene, whose meat came from a butcher, not from hunting, remembered eating guts and fat, in addition to meat, as children.

USING EVERY PART OF THE ANIMAL: EATING ENTRAILS AND FAT

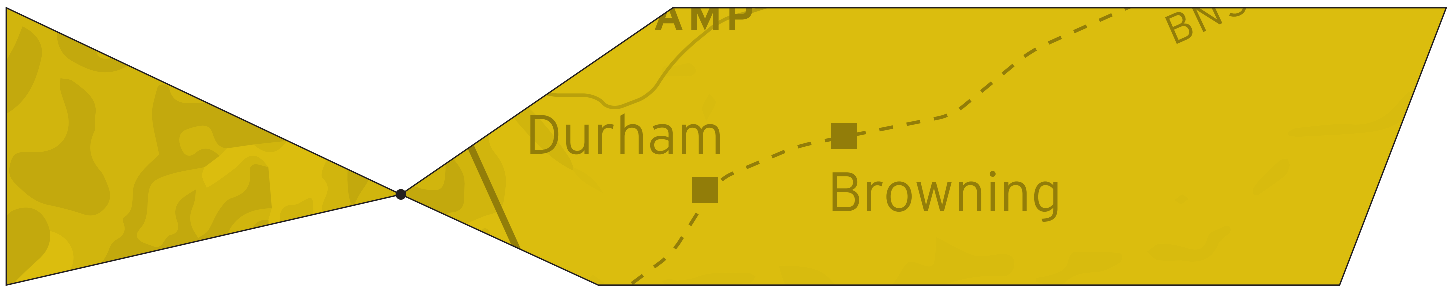
Every person interviewed fondly remembered eating guts of domesticated beef or wild elk or deer as children. Liver, kidney, tripe, and sweet bread (pancreas) were commonly eaten foods. Historically, the Blackfeet used all parts of the animals they killed, including guts. Guts were sometimes dried and used as a toy, such as a ball, or as a utensil, such as a bowl. They were also eaten. Though no one interviewed specifically discussed eating bison guts, this tradition of using the whole animal has been passed down from our ancestors. Today and during the interviewees' childhoods, this food source was drawn from what was available, including wild game (that no longer includes wild bison) and sometimes beef. As a child in the 1940s, Angeline remembers that her family would get beef from a butcher in Browning. Her mother would wash the guts in Willow Creek and hang them up to dry, similar to dried meat. Often, she would dry beef lungs to recook later.

She remembers:

> "One time mom said, you want some Indian hot dogs? Indian wieners she called them. And she'd take her guts, you know, that she dried, and she'd put it in the oven and give it to those (neighborhood) boys with bannock. And those boys just loved it. (My brother) used to get so embarrassed that she was feeding his friends entrails!"

Though her mother was using beef instead of a more "traditional" or wild meat, she continued to use a traditional recipe and preparation technique that had been passed down to her. Angeline's mother would rinse the beef guts, turn them inside out, and dry them outside. Today, interviewees noted that beef guts are more readily available in grocery stores, though the younger generation doesn't enjoy eating them as much. Similar to Angeline's mother's use of beef guts instead of guts from bison or wild game, recipes using guts are adapted as well. For example, Margaret makes menudo, a Mexican soup that uses tripe (beef stomach). Though not a "traditional" Blackfeet food, she remembers that she once made it for a Blackfeet potluck and the dish was loved by the elders as it reminded them of foods they ate during their childhood.

> "Our ancestors practically, instead of putting the fat in between everything they ate, they almost used the fat for bread and put things in and ate it! But they were healthy!"



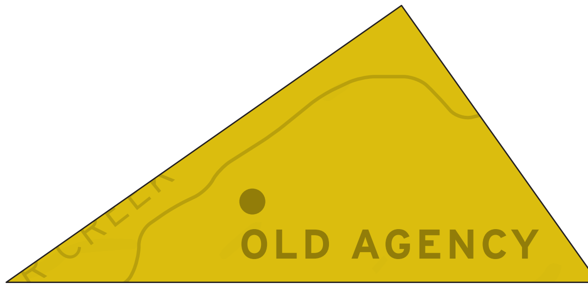
Animal fat was also commonly eaten in a variety of ways. Fat was turned into gravy for potatoes or used in soup. Fat was mixed with berries and dried into patties – sometimes called pemmican – that could be eaten alone or mixed with dry meat in winter months to make berry soup. Similarly, fat was mixed with peppermint and dried and eaten with deer meat or dried meat. Irene considered peppermint fat a special treat. Reflecting on the role of fat in her childhood diet, Irene exclaimed: "Our ancestors practically, instead of putting the fat in between everything they ate, they almost used the fat for bread and put things in and ate it! But they were healthy!"

Bison ready for preparation.

CLEANING A BISON: IT TAKES A VILLAGE

One fact that has not changed for millennia is that it takes a long time to clean a bison. While advancements in technology – guns, sharper and thinner knives, hoses – has sped up the process slightly, it is still a time consuming activity that requires many people to be successful. For those who hunt, it is a very similar process to gutting and cleaning other large animals.

Historically however, the Blackfeet would use every part of the bison, guts included. This makes the process of cleaning very long, as all guts were cleaned to be dried and used as material goods or eaten. Traditionally, men hunted and women did all the cleaning and butchering. Women have always been an integral part of food preparation and the economic stability of the Blackfeet. And historically, Blackfeet women became the owners of the bison meat to distribute equally among family members.



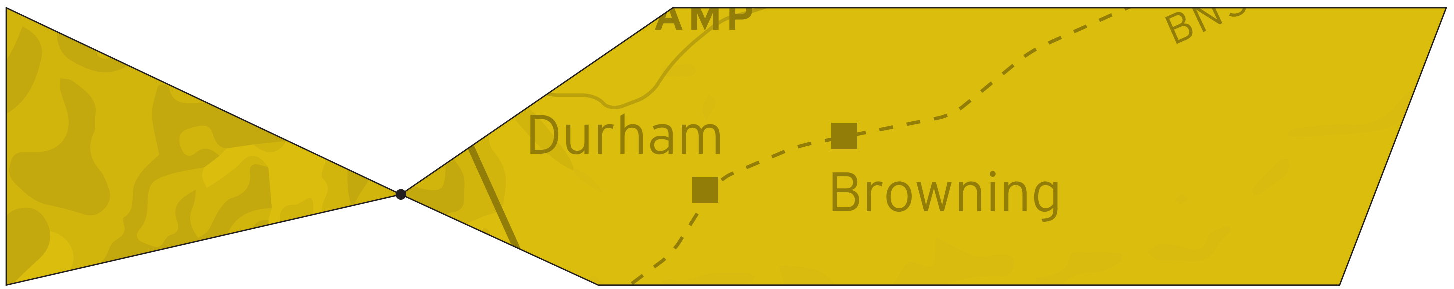
Skinning and cleaning the bison.

The Skin: Bison hides were used for clothing, blankets, bags, and tipi coverings, among other material goods. Tufts of thick bison hair (near the hump) were also used in ceremonies, similar to sage, for smudging or protecting sacred objects. Thus, it is important to insure that the hide is properly separated from the meat and that there are no holes in it.

The Guts: Traditionally, bison guts were used for a variety of purposes. As our interviewees noted, though they didn't grow up eating bison, they did grow up eating guts. Cleaning guts is a long process to ensure they are clean. It involves soaking the guts in water and pushing water through the intestines so they are clean on the inside as well. Historically, this was done in a stream, but today, we can use water hoses to push water through.

The "Bible": The Blackfeet use the same Blackfeet word for Bible "natoapsinaksin" as they did for bison stomach. Why? It has dozens of folds and crevices that look like pages in a book. This makes cleaning the stomach especially tedious to ensure all the folds are cleaned.

Bison was eaten in myriad ways: bison fat was mixed with peppermint, dried, and put in soup; bison meat was cooked with root vegetables in soup; both meat and fat were dried to use in later months; and the broth was used similar to tea.

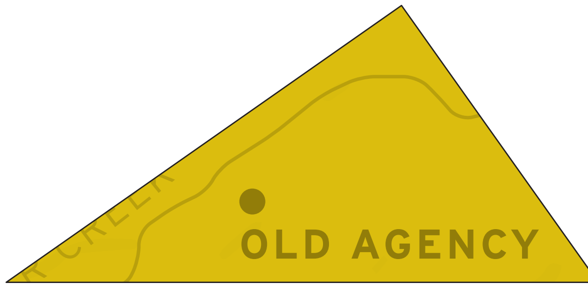


Unfortunately, today bison meat can be very expensive to purchase in a store. The Blackfeet Tribe has a herd of bison that members of the tribe can occasionally use for community activities or ceremonies. For example, the photos in this section were from a cultural event hosted for clients at Crystal Creek Lodge Treatment Center; the meat was used at the summer Sobriety Campout.

BISON ORIGIN STORY

This story was adapted from a text published by C.C. Uhlenbeck, who collected stories with the help of his Blackfeet translator Joseph Tatsey. While reading this story, remember that the Blackfeet lived in a different cultural context than we do today, and history, like this origin story, was passed down orally in the Blackfeet language.

The ancient Blackfeet people used to be vegetarians: eating roseberries, hardseed-berries, bark, black alkali, and more. One day, a woman who lived with her husband in the woods was out gathering roseberries when she met a young man. He asked her if she had a daughter who he could marry. She brought him back to meet her husband. The young man then married their daughter. The young man stayed with them and they fed him, but he ate only black alkali and hay for two nights. He refused to eat berries and bark. The father, observing the young man's eating habits, was suspicious that this young man was not the same kind of being as he and his family. The father wondered if the young man was human. The father went to the young man on the

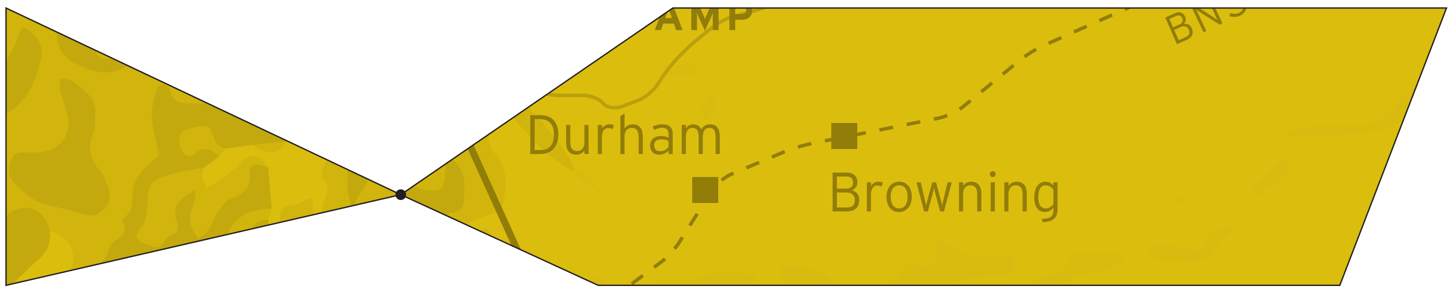


The Blackfeet bison herd roaming at the start of another summer in Montana.

fourth night, asking him what kind of being he was. The father then asked the young man to go hunt, and the young man agreed. The young man brought back a carcass of a human. The father refused to eat it. The father told the young man to go hunt someone from his own tribe, and the father would decide which tasted best. The young man was gone for one night and brought back a carcass from someone of his own tribe. The father ate the first meat the young man had brought, and the father vomited it up. The father then ate the meat from the young man's own tribe, and the father did not vomit it up. His wife and children then ate both carcasses, and the same thing happened. The father then asked his family which meat they liked best: the one they had vomited up, or the one of the young man's tribe? They agreed the meat from the young man's tribe tasted better. They decided to name the beings from the young man's tribe bison and the one from their own tribe people. This is how those names were decided.

The father asked the young man where he was from, and he said he lived in the water world. The father asked the young man what he ate, and the young man said he ate people, hay, and alkali. The father responded, "Now we shall eat you too." The young man grabbed a torch, put the rest of the human carcass under his arm, and began running until he turned into a bison and jumped into the water.

The next summer, the daughter gave birth to a son, who was half bison-half human. The father was ashamed of his grandchild, and the family abandoned him in the wilderness. The son soon grew



up, becoming a person. When he grew old enough, he began walking and searching for his family. He went in the direction that he thought that they went. Along the way, he met two young men who pitied him. They decided to ask their father if the young boy could stay with them. The boy was able to live with their tribe, and was well taken care of.

After a time, the boy's real bison father and his friend got out of a nearby lake and turned into humans. The boy began to follow them. His real father and the friend waited for him. The boy introduced them to his elder brothers. The boy's father said that he would introduce them all to the Chief-Underwater Bison-Bull. The father got on all fours, and the boy got on his back. The father's companion got on all fours, and the boy's brother got on his back. As they ran they turned into bison, and soon all four were underwater in the lake.

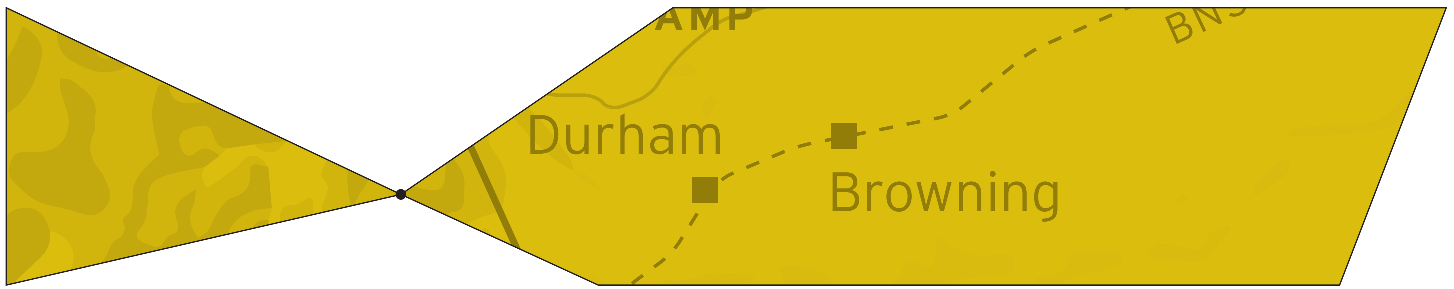
When they arrived at the underwater village, the father and his friend began shouting to the whole village that they could eat the two people (the boy and his brother) who had just arrived. The grandfather Chief disagreed, he instead said that he would gift the humans with half of his tribe of bison, for humans to eat. The bison would be a thank you gift to the humans for adopting the half-bison boy and raising him well.

The boy's father still had the human carcass that he had hunted long ago, but now it had turned into a dog. With the grandfather Underwater Bison Bull's blessing they all came out of the lake. When they got

out of the lake the dog began barking and half of the bison tribe came out of the water. The dog "called" the bison out of the water. The half-bison boy and his father turned into humans, and found the boy's mother and her parents. The father-in-law was no longer upset with his son-in-law. He was grateful for the gift of the bison, and welcomed his grandson and son-in-law back into the family.

The father-in-law asked the boy's father how to kill the bison. The son-in-law said they should be killed with flints, which they could also use to skin the bison with. The son-in-law told them to build corrals at the bottom of steep cliffs, and run the bison off of the cliffs (or bison jumps). The son-in-law then said he would stay with the family, he wanted to stay with his wife and son. Finally, he asked his father-in-law to bury him in the water when he died so he could turn into a rock. This is the end of the story (or as the old Blackfeet used to say: the boiling is ended).

During the decline of the bison in the late 1800s, many elders believed that half of the bison that existed were still alive and living underwater. Even at the time this story was collected by C.C. Uhlenbeck and Joseph Tatsey in 1910, he noted that elders still believed that the second half of the bison would eventually come to their aid.



MEDICINAL PLANTS AND TEAS

The Blackfeet historically and in contemporary times use plants for medicinal purposes as well as for food. Medicinal plants were prominently discussed during the interviews, and the majority of the interviewees continue to regularly pick and use traditional medicine. Indeed, many of

> "Purchasing teas is one way that those who are unable to collect and process plants themselves can still use traditional medicines."

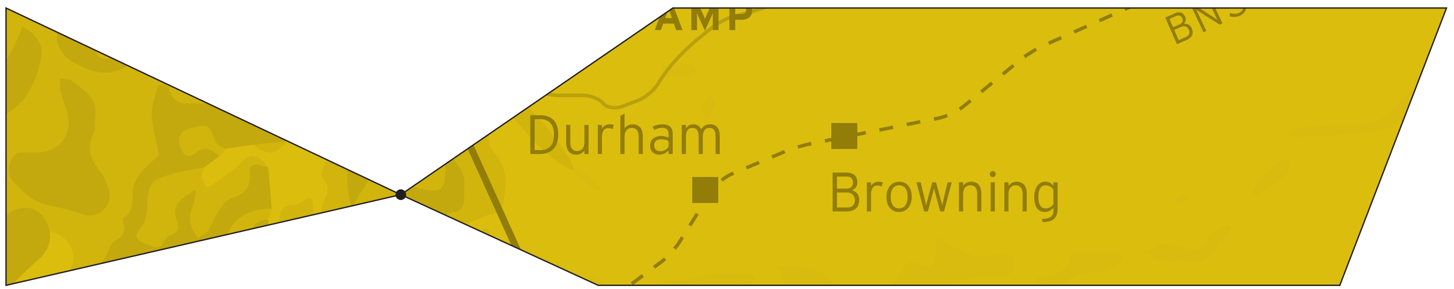
those we interviewed reminisced that as children, they had no access to other forms of medicine besides plants and prayers. This was in part because of poverty and lack of transportation to access healthcare. Angeline remembers that "we were raised just knowing exactly what we had to pick and when we had to pick it." Today, she continues to pick berries, roots, and leaves with her daughter, nieces, and grandchildren. About half of those interviewed continue to pick or use traditional medicines like peppermint, sage, or root medicine. Bernadette continues to use Blackfeet medicine on a daily basis, including alum root for joint pain, huckleberry tea for regulating blood sugar, and blue root for pain relief.

Many herbal medicines are now available in health food stores or large box grocery stores (like Walmart), primarily in tea form or as concentrated drops to consume orally. Angeline noted that "Now you can buy wild cherry tea, whereas before we used the stems for tea. You can now go into the store and buy things that are wild cherries, whereas before we had to go pick it . . . that part has changed." Purchasing teas is one way that those who are

unable to collect and process plants themselves can still use traditional medicines. However, besides peppermint, many of these medicinal teas or herbal medicines have low availability or are too expensive in stores on the Blackfeet Reservation.

In addition to medicines with chemical impacts – like willow bark or arnica, which are analgesic pain relievers – prayers or ceremonies are also a form of traditional medicine. As Angeline noted, "When we were small, all (our mother) had was her herbal medicine and prayers to get us through, . . . to help us with a toothache, with a cold." When Becky was a child, her grandfather helped with medicine lodge and singing healing songs, though the rest of his family was strongly Catholic.

She notes of today, "Of course we smudge in the morning. Use sweet pine, sweet grass, and smudge in the morning . . . Around here there's a lot of bad people and they can leave stuff behind. So we smudge in the morning, . . . I still believe in that way." Becky also participated in traditional ceremonies to help with her daughter's drug addiction issues, which she said helped for a while.



Red leaf.

Preparing root medicine.

HOW TO PREPARE MEDICINAL PLANTS

Many medicines used by the Blackfeet were made into teas, including willow bark (a pain killer), yucca (anti-inflammatory), or licorice (reduces throat swelling). The following chart lists common medicinal plants and what they are used for. Some of these plants are also available at health food stores. First, here are instructions on how to prepare a basic medicinal tea – from picking to drinking.

1. **Ethics:** Collect plants selectively. Do not over pick, select a few adult plants at each area and move to another area. Avoid collecting the whole plant (unless necessary).

2. **Tips for picking:** When picking a root – like blue root - use a screwdriver or stick to help you pry it out of the soil without tearing it too much. Most roots can be easily pulled out of the ground if they are being picked at the right time, except alum root which you have to dig. If picking leaves, bring shears or heavy scissors (like for gardening). When gathering leaves – like for huckleberry tea – it is easiest to cut the leaf and the branch, instead of picking the leaves by hand. It is easy to clean out the sticks and branches later.

3. **Cleaning:** Clean your roots with water and dry them. At this point, it is important to clean dirt or extra plants bits – unwanted leaves, sticks, et cetera – off the plant.

4. **Drying:** Different plants are dried differently. Roots can be hung from a pole off the ceiling. Leaves and berries can be easily dried in a pan or canvas cloth. Berries should be rotated occasionally while drying.

5. **Making tea:** Boil the water before placing the root or leaf in and let it steep (soak) for about half an hour. Do not put the plant in before you boil the water, or it will weaken the medicine. The same plant can be boiled multiple times until it gets too weak – for example, boiled alum root (an astringent used for blisters, wounds, or healing arthritic pain) can be used around three times.

FOURTEEN PLANTS FOR HEALTH AND HEALING

We list the name in Latin because regionally, some plant names may vary in English.

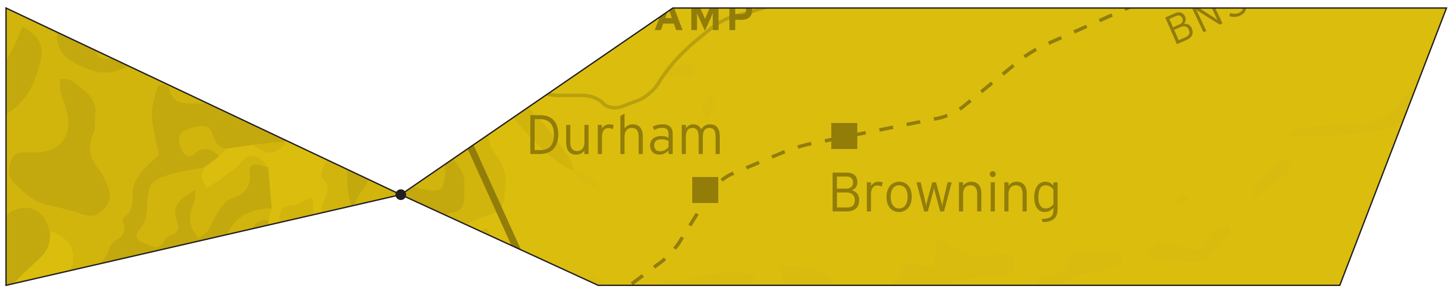
1. **Otsipiis, *Salix spp.*, Willow bark**
   - Scrape off the inside of the bark.
   - Can be mixed with oil and used externally or made into tea and ingested.
   - An analgesic pain reliever.

2. **Omahkaapistsisskits, *Arnica spp.*, Arnica root**
   - Mix root with oil or cream and rub on externally.
   - An analgesic pain reliever.

3. **Áíksikkooki, *Yucca glauca*, Yucca**
   - Dry the roots or leaves.
   - Anti-inflammatory for arthritis or injury.
   - Can be used internally or externally.

4. **Ááhsowa, *Glycyrrhiza lepidota*, Licorice root**
   - Dry roots and drink as tea.
   - Reduces swelling in the stomach and throat.

5. **Ka'kitsímo, *Mentha spp.*, Peppermint**
   - Dry leaves and drink as tea.
   - Relieves stomach pain and nausea.
   - Helps with indigestion.



6. **Otohtoksiin, *Rubus strigosis*, Raspberry**
   - Dry leaves and drink as tea.
   - Regulates menstrual cycle.
   - Antioxidant.
   - Muscle and blood vessel relaxant.

7. **Aapaawapsspi, *Vaccinium spp.*, Huckleberry**
   - Dry leaves and berries and use as tea.
   - Lowers blood sugar.
   - Improves eyesight.

8. **Áípahtsíkaimo, *Valeriana spp.*, Valerian root**
   - Dry root and use as a tea.
   - Use as anti-anxiety.
   - Addresses sleep issues.

9. **Niistskápa's, *Lomatium triternatum*, Biscuit root**
   - Boil and drink dried leaf (not root) as tea.
   - Use as cold or cough medicine.
   - Biscuit root and carrots are different species from the same plant family.

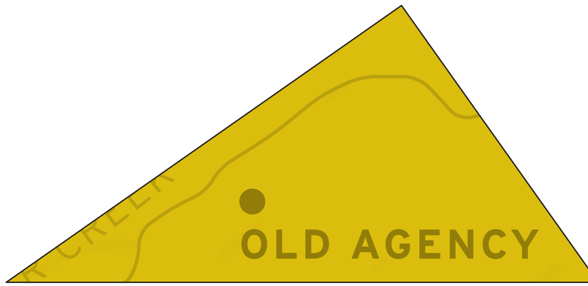
10. **Iihtaomaitsimihkio'p, *Eriogunum umbellatum*, Red leaf**
    - Dry leaves and make into tea.
    - Use to increase appetite and address stomach pain.
    - Can be mixed with huckleberry tea.

11. **Otahkoyitsi, *Comandra umbellata*, Blueroot**
    - Dry roots and boil into tea.
    - Use as pain relief.

12. **Apahsipoko, *Heuchera cylindrica or H. parvifolia*, Alum root**
    - Boil alum root with water.
    - Assists with arthritic pain and works as an astringent to dry wounds.
    - Can rub on cuts, blisters, or joints (put on olive oil or lotion afterwards since it dries skin).
    - Can be mixed with red leaf or huckleberry tea for flavor as tea.

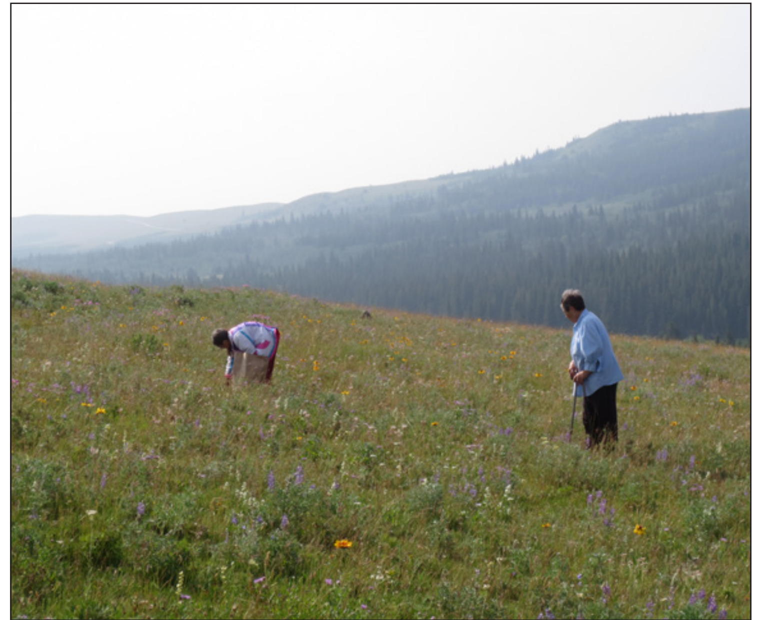
13. **Ka'ksimiis, *Artemisia spp.*, Sage**
    - Dried leaves are burned for purification and prayer.
    - 36 species of sage in Montana.

14. **Sipátsimo, *Hierochloe orodata*, Sweet grass**
    - Dried leaves are burned for purification and prayer.



part three

Contemporary Access to Traditional Foods on the Blackfeet Reservation

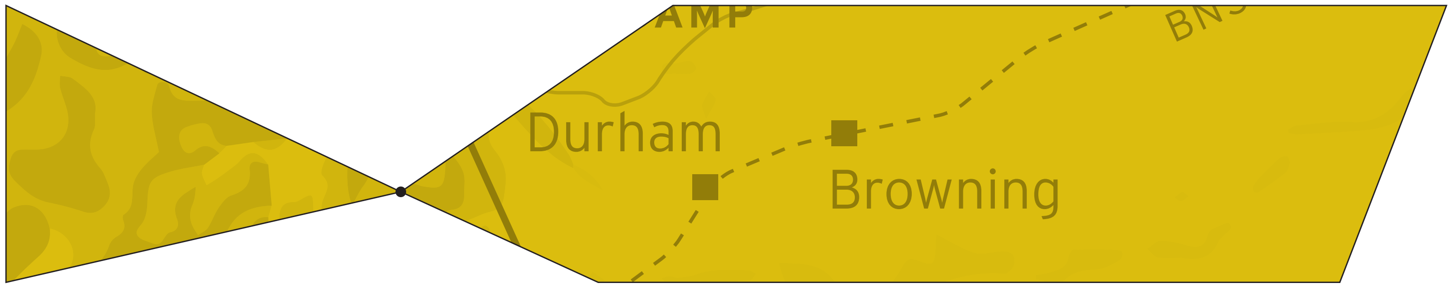


Bernadette Wall and Angeline Wall collecting roots.

Access to and use of traditional foods has changed in the last several decades for several reasons. One reason is changes in hunting regulations. When Frank and others of his generation were younger, there was no hunting "season," people could hunt when they needed. Meat was thus available throughout the year for food. Today, the hunting season imposed by the state of Montana limits when people are able to hunt, even on the reservation, and hunting permits are required. This has benefits and drawbacks.

On the one hand, Frank and Glen note that people can now only hunt "once a year," and if you want wild meat the rest of the year, it needs to be frozen or dried. However, Eli noted that these hunting regulations protect animal populations from being wiped out, allowing animals time to repopulate each year. Indeed, Glen observed that because of hunting season laws, populations of mule deer, elk, and moose have rebounded.

***Opposite:** Huckleberries on the Blackfeet Reservation, near Divide.*



Another change in hunting has been the purpose for hunting. Today both Glen and Eli think that many people do it for sport, instead of out of necessity. Glen observes: "What we do now, we need to pass on to our children, to our youth. Not just the sport of it but how that sustained the survival of our people and our family." That is not to say that the younger generation is completely uninterested in learning about traditional ways of hunting or preparing meat. Margaret notes that:

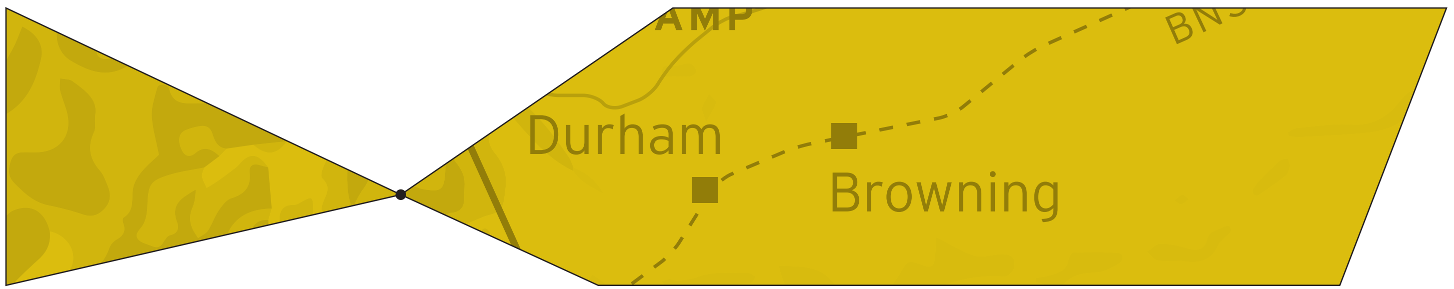
> "With the meat I have in the freezer, I could make dry meat all year long. I'm glad my grandkids like stuff like that. When they have a part in it, like the picking of it, they enjoy it more. And like, they help skin the deer, they help cut the meat, I'm teaching my granddaughter how to cut dry meat."

"What we do now, we need to pass on to our children, to our youth. Not just the sport of it but how that sustained the survival of our people and our family."

Becky continues to hunt and prepare meat with her husband as well. However, they no longer dry meat, as she and past generations ate as children, but make jerky with a dehydrator. She says, "we don't have a wood stove and for dry meat, you need a wood stove or smoker otherwise the meat, it gets sour. But we still prepare deer meat and use deer meat a lot." Instead, she and her husband use more contemporary methods of meat drying, and continue to hunt. Margaret also eats wild game throughout the year, filling her freezer with wild game from her sons.

As reflected through the interviews, traditional foods, and traditional food preparation, are still used among some Blackfeet community members. Margaret, Becky, Angeline, and Bernadette continue to gather berries and medicinal plants. Eli, Glen, Margaret, and Becky hunt in addition to eating store bought meat. However, this does not necessarily reflect the rest of the reservation. In 2016, the Food Access and Sustainability Team (FAST) conducted research on food security and food sovereignty on the Blackfeet Reservation.[16] They surveyed 250 reservation residents on access to traditional and locally produced foods and found that the foods most associated as traditional foods were: potatoes, beef meat, buffalo meat, frybread, and berries. While neither frybread nor potatoes are "traditional" in the sense that they were eaten pre-contact or historically by the Blackfeet, they have become widespread foods post-colonization.

The survey also asked residents about barriers in accessing local and traditional foods. Most frequently cited barriers included high prices, lack of money, lack of knowledge about traditional foods, limited food producers and availability, poor soil quality, limitations of the hunting seasons and laws, and transportation (presumably to collect plants or hunt). The survey found that traditional foods were most likely to be accessed from purchasing them in a store, hunting, gathering, or from friends and families.



This access was reflected in our oral history interviews as well. Angeline said that some traditional foods are now available in stores; not necessarily in on-reservation stores, however. She noted:

> "They don't sell them here, but if you're around a Mexican community and you can buy those guts . . . you can buy them in the store . . . Same way with berries. Maybe not much here in the United States, but if you cross the [Canadian] border you can buy huckleberry jam, you can buy sarvis berry jam, you can buy sarvis berry pie. Across the border they do a lot with sarvis berries, they actually market it. I don't see it marketed around here."

Off reservation health food stores, and even well stocked grocery stores such as Walmart now sell traditional root medicine teas and medicines, such as peppermint tea, valerian tea, and wild cherry tea.

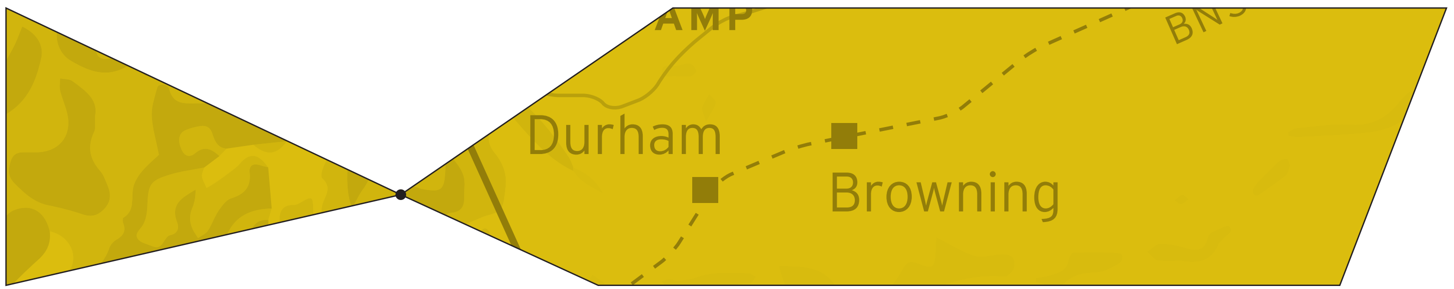
JUNK FOOD, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURAL LOSS

Increased individual and community wealth also appear to have impacted the use of traditional foods. According to those we interviewed, the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables has increased, creating less dependence on gardening and picking berries. Today, picking berries and roots is more often done to supplement people's diet, as opposed to being a primary food source. Many people now have cars as well, so they can more easily drive to a grocery store, either on or off reservation. Most of those we interviewed did not grow up in families with cars, so their food was much more localized, and they were more dependent on commodities.

The proliferation of junk food has profoundly impacted diets on the reservation. Those we interviewed all noted that the consumption of junk food was the greatest change in eating since their childhoods. Angeline noted: "Now-a-days when people say 'oh this is a traditional meal,' what they got is red wieners! Well red wieners has never been a traditional Indian meal. But that's part of it now-a-days." Red weiners have a particularly high fat content. Because there are so few grocery stores on the reservation, many people get their food from convenience stores. The Blackfeet Reservation can be categorized as a "food desert," with only two grocery stores for the nearly 1.5 million acres of land. The Reservation also has higher food insecurity rates than the rest of the state of Montana.[17]

"We ate a lot at other people's houses. That's how it was back in the day, everyone helped one another, mainly with food. People weren't stingy with food back in the day, . . . whatever they had they shared."

In addition to changes in food preparation and availability, the interviewees noted changes in the culture of the Blackfeet Reservation. During both generations, there was a strong communal feeling. Margaret summed up the feeling well: "We ate a lot at other people's houses. That's how it was back in the day, everyone helped one another, mainly with food. People weren't stingy with food back in the day, . . . whatever they had they shared."



Every person interviewed had a story of a neighbor or family member sharing food with them. During their childhood, Angeline and Irene's parents often got meat from their neighbors, including mutton. Their mother would also share her food, like guts, with other neighborhood children. Similarly, Debbie, Margaret, and Becky all have stories of eating bread, fried chicken, and other food at their neighbor's houses. They also got apples from a family member who was a migrant farm worker, who would return to the Reservation at the end of picking season and give boxes of apples to families in need. They reflected that this support for others is virtually non-existent today. Today, with the availability of several federal programs on the reservation – including free lunch food for school children – there is less of a dependence on others in the community for food.

Those we interviewed had several ideas as to why there is now less communal sharing of foods. Frank reflected, "To say that was the good old days! No drugs, no pills. There was people that drink, but they'd go [to] this place west of here they call Dusties. Or they'd go to Cut Bank, but now, oh, we got all kinds of drugs. It ain't hurting the big people it's hurting the kids." He complained that parents he knows seem to too often use their income to purchase drugs, as opposed to food for their children. Becky had a similar experience, saying that drug addiction and absentee parenting cause children to suffer and go without healthy food: "We're lucky that Browning has this food service where they feed the kids for free, . . . Browning as a whole is sinking fast because of the addictions here, and the little kids don't have too much to eat." In addition to the spread of addiction, Margaret thinks there has been a decrease in respect for elders among younger community members, changing the overall culture.

This loss of cultural knowledge is not just related to food. Irene reflects that her mother (who has passed away) was concerned about how the younger generations were practicing Blackfeet culture and ceremonies. She says her mother viewed contemporary ceremonies as not traditionally or historically accurate, especially since they often use the English language instead of the Blackfeet language in ceremonies. While this is a completely understandable concern for the older generation, we should also reflect as to whether or not culture is stagnant. Is it more important that ceremonies be "historically accurate," or that they are being engaged with in ways that make sense and are accessible for contemporary Blackfeet? Is there one Blackfeet culture, or are there multiple Blackfeet cultural adaptations? Different bands, societies, and families have always had unique practices – that became perhaps even more distinct from one another as a reaction to colonization. These are important questions to reflect on when thinking about revitalizing traditional foods and medicines into our diets and our communities.

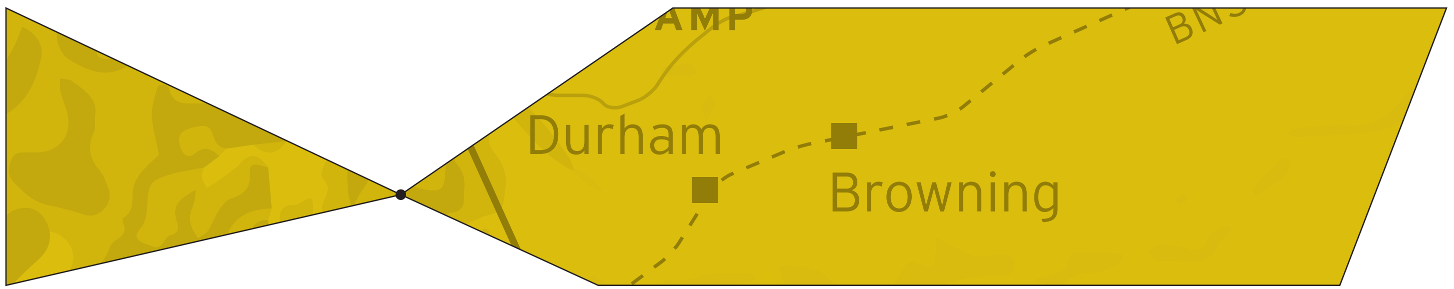
part four
The Future of Traditional Foods

PASSING IT TO THE NEXT GENERATION

As reflected in these interviews and the FAST survey, there are a variety of reasons fewer and fewer people prepare traditional foods. One of the reasons elucidated in these interviews was that it is no longer a necessity – people can buy meat or fruits and vegetables at the grocery store, and so they are not as reliant on a subsistence lifestyle for survival. Today, most of those interviewed use traditional foods or medicines as a supplement to their diet, not as a main part of their diet. They also continue to gather medicinal or edible plants and hunt as a way to continue Blackfeet heritage and tradition.

However, several interviewees said they wanted this knowledge to be passed on to their grandchildren, and were making efforts to do so. Margaret, for example, takes her grandchildren hunting and is teaching them how to cut dry meat. She also takes her grandchildren and daughter picking, primarily gooseberries, chokecherries, sarvis berries, peppermint, and sage. She freezes meat and berries all year long. She uses the peppermint and sage to remedy colds and other ailments throughout the year as well. She noted, "I'm glad my grandkids like stuff like that. When they have a part in it, like the picking of it, they enjoy it more. And like, they help skin the deer, they help cut the meat, and I'm teaching my granddaughter how to cut dry meat." Becky tries to engage her daughters with picking and gathering as well saying it is essential to "go on more trips and bring them with us, and the granddaughters too."

Opposite: *Rocky Mountain Goats on Going-to-the-Sun Road.*



HOW DO WE BRING TRADITIONAL FOODS INTO OUR HOMES AND FAMILIES?

In these modern times it is probably not possible to eat a completely "traditional foods diet." It is time consuming to gather enough plants and meat to last throughout the year, some of the plants that Blackfeet ate are now far away from the reservation, and our tastes and flavor preferences have changed. And, as reflected in the previous section, what is "traditional"? Would a truly traditional diet mean not eating bannock bread or potatoes – foods that we grew up loving, and recipes that were passed down from our grandmothers?

> "There are three essential reasons to incorporate traditional foods into our diets and communities: to revitalize Blackfeet cultural knowledge; to improve community health by integrating more local plant foods; and to continue to use and protect the environment around us."

It is significant in itself to incorporate certain aspects of traditional food gathering and preparation. There are three essential reasons to incorporate traditional foods into our diets and communities: to revitalize Blackfeet cultural knowledge; to improve community health by integrating more local plant foods; and to continue to use and protect the environment around us.

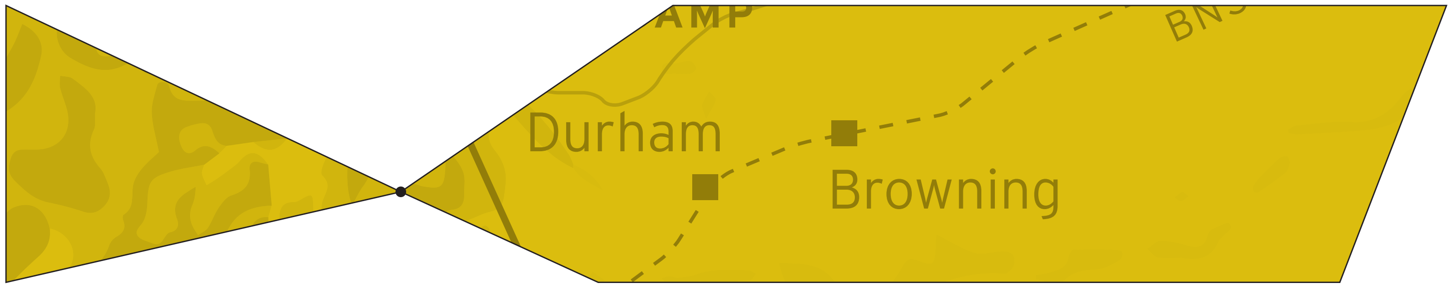
Throughout this report, we have provided several recipes and tips on plant gathering and traditional foods. These are suggestions and first steps to making our community healthier and our culture stronger.

1. **Food:** Traditional foods and medicines can replace what you already eat. Sarvis berries, gooseberries, and chokecherries can replace blueberries or other fruits, and can be cooked traditionally, as in berry soup, or frozen and used in pancakes or muffins.

2. **Medicine:** With the list we have provided (pages 39–40), you can integrate root and herbal medicine into your health care regime. Instead of buying peppermint tea and other medicines, consider gathering peppermint and making the tea yourself. Many of these can be taken on a daily basis to help regulate your health. For example, Bernadette drinks huckleberry tea on a regular basis, which helps regulate blood sugar. She also rubs alum root on her hands and arms up to three times a day to help with bone pain. Alum can also be used for people with arthritis.

3. **Exercise:** Gathering wild plants, hunting, processing plants and meat, and preserving plants and meat for future use all require physical activity. Exercise is an important part of a balanced and healthy lifestyle.

4. **Purchase:** An easy way to incorporate traditional foods and medicines into your diet is to purchase them in stores. While it is not the traditional collection method, it is an important first step for those interested in introducing more traditional foods into their diets. It is also a good option for those who may not have much time or access to transportation to collect and dry the plants



themselves. Many of the root and herbal medicine listed in this report (particularly teas) can be purchased in well stocked grocery stores and health food stores.

5. **Advocate on the tribal level:** Advocate for the tribal government and organizations on the reservation to do more to make traditional foods available. At a minimum, the Blackfeet own a bison herd and they can begin providing bison meat to elders on a regular basis. In the next section, we provide concrete suggestions based on our interviews with community members and information from the Blackfeet Food Access and Sustainability Team survey conducted on the reservation in summer, 2016.

part five
Further Action

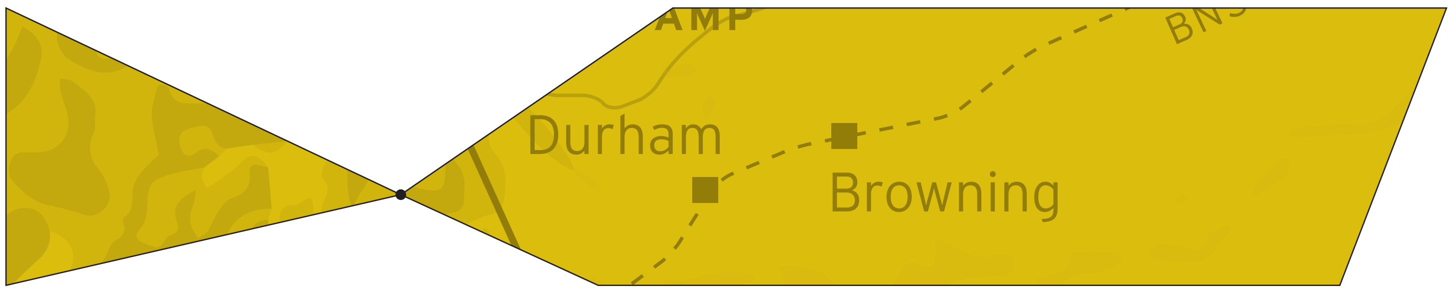
SUGGESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH PROMOTION

In addition to integrating traditional foods into our lives on a personal and familial level, there are steps the tribal government and tribal community as a whole can take as well. The suggestions we have compiled include ideas from our interviewees – all older people who live and grew up on the Blackfeet Reservation – as well as data from the FAST survey on access to traditional foods. Both the survey and the interviews outlined similar barriers and solutions. Support of traditional foods and traditional ecological knowledge will provide a myriad of benefits to the community beyond health and cultural revitalization. Integration of affordable traditional foods into the product lines at Glacier Family Foods, the tribally run grocery store, for example, will benefit the reservation economy and provide more people with jobs in hunting or gathering foods. Creating a system in which hunted meats are provided to poor children or elders will reduce hunger and address poverty. Below, please find suggestions from our interviewees:

1. **Sell locally hunted wild game and locally processed bison at the tribally run grocery store Glacier Family Foods.** As Glen noted in an interview, "There's so much wild meat on our land that it wouldn't hurt to give some away. And a lot of people would gladly go harvest that to give it to the children and elderly. That way no one goes hungry."

2. **Develop more robust food safety laws to increase tribal food production.** In other areas of the country, tribes are burdened with laws under the Food Safety Modernization Act. Though this act does a lot of good in terms of protecting consumers by increasing

Opposite: *A bowl of freshly-picked huckleberries.*



regulations on food processing, it burdens some tribes that want to use traditional food production techniques, or do not have access to industrial level kitchens. Some tribes, like the Salt Water Pima-Maricopa Indian Community in Arizona which is working on a traditional seed bank, are responding by creating their own food safety laws.[18] The Blackfeet Tribe could similarly develop advanced food safety laws to sell bison meat or wild game in our grocery store.

3. **Establish a large community garden that will help to feed the most needy people on the Reservation, particularly elders and young people.** This can also be a place of nutrition and health education. The Blackfeet Community College already has a garden that grows corn, summer squash, carrots, celery, and other vegetables. BCC encourages others in the community to start their own gardens by providing seeds and plants at their People's Market. However, we should also remember that gardening and farming are colonial, not traditional Blackfeet, ways of food production. Though gardens provide healthy and locally produced foods, they are not how the Blackfeet historically produced food.

4. **Provide and support regular education opportunities on both nutrition and health, as well as on traditional food gathering and recipes.** One suggestion mentioned quite frequently by interviewees was the need for nutrition classes for young and new parents.

5. **Make fast food less available. Fast foods are so cheap and widely available that they become the food that people easily reach for.** The Navajo Nation introduced a 2% tax on junk food to curb obesity in 2014. They also removed a 5% tax on fruits and vegetables to incentivize people to eat healthier.[19] One issue with this, however, is that

junk food is often one of the few cheap foods available. The tribe would have to insure that healthy foods were inexpensive and widely available before increasing the price on fast foods.

There are also ways we can support food sovereignty on a systemic level, beyond our families and individual tribal community. Here are suggestions from the Saokio Heritage team on steps we can take to further propagate traditional ecological knowledge:

6. **Community members should pursue college degrees in science, technology, and health; fields that will support the study of food sovereignty and traditional ecological knowledge.** It is crucial for our community members to have expertise in these subjects so we can develop institutions, laws, and programs that support Blackfeet food sovereignty.

7. **Support and implement further studies and projects on food sovereignty.** The community should continue to record and make available the ecological knowledge of Blackfeet elders and community members. Beyond this report, further research, projects, or classes should be implemented in the community to educate people on and engage people with traditional foods and medicines.

8. **Advocate for policy change on the national level.** Pay attention to food sovereignty, environmental issues and policy on a national level; climate change and environmental stewardship has a deep impact on the local level.

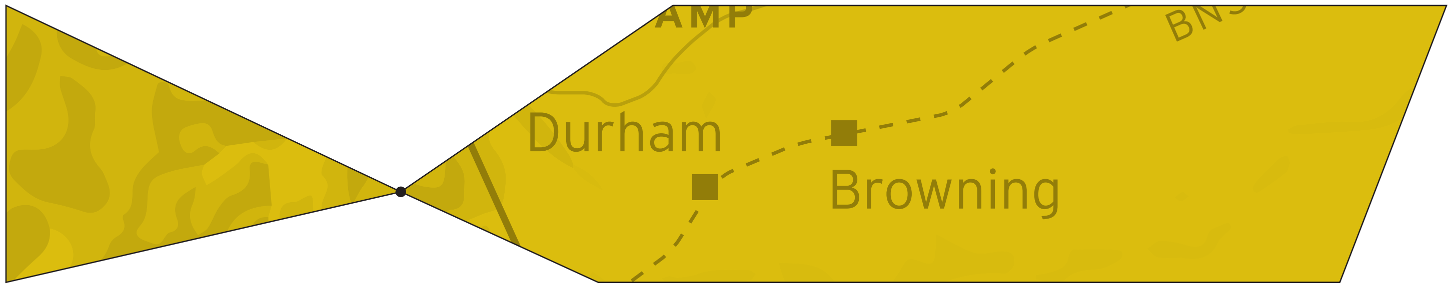
Conclusion

The preservation and revitalization of traditional Blackfeet foods and medicines is up to all of us. It is clear that though the U.S. government tried for generations to remove us from this knowledge through overt war, boarding schools, and placing us on reservations, it never disappeared. However, as Becky succinctly stated, "If the next generation doesn't come and see how what you collect looks, then they won't know. It'll end with this generation."

> "If the next generation doesn't come and see how what you collect looks, then they won't know. It'll end with this generation."

It is up to the tribal government to make wild game and locally gathered foods and medicines more available at the tribal grocery store, at schools on the reservation, and through food distribution programs to those most in need. It is up to those with knowledge to continue using it and making efforts to pass it on to their children and grandchildren. It is up to us – the children and grandchildren – to ask our elders about gathering plants, and if they don't know, to educate ourselves and our families. Our ancestors' knowledge must not end with us, but instead, grow stronger.

Opposite: *The late Theresa Still Smoking holding peppermint.*



Special Thanks

Abaki Beck (Blackfeet/Metis) is a young professional, activist, and writer. She graduated from Macalester College with honors with a B.A. in American Studies in 2015. Abaki served as our primary writer and researcher.

Danielle Antelope (Blackfeet/Eastern Shoshone) is a student at Blackfeet Community College pursuing a degree in Health Science. Danielle served as our student intern and assisted in organizing our interviews.

Lucien Liz-Lepiorz graduated with a B.F.A in Graphic Design from George Washington University in 2016. Lucien created the maps for and designed this report.

Thank you to the Blackfeet elders, Frank Still Smoking, Irene Old Chief, Angeline Wall and Bernadette Wall for sharing their stories of their lives growing up on the Blackfeet reservation.

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Oral history is a traditional method of passing down information and sharing stories from one generation to the next. We appreciate the knowledge that our elders shared with us as we worked on this project.

Further Reading

In addition to the oral history interviews, these are the sources we used for our research that may be of interest to community members or others who are interested in expanding their knowledge of Indigenous food sovereignty or Blackfeet history.

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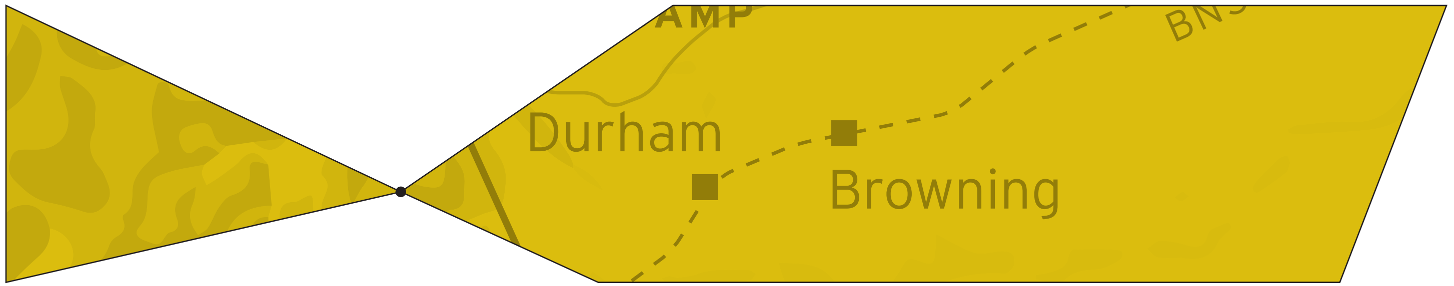
- McElrone, Marissa. "Blackfeet Reservation Community Food Security and Food Sovereignty Assessment." FAST (Food Access and Sustainability Team) Blackfeet. Summer 2016.



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- Harrod, Howard L. *Mission Among the Blackfeet*. University of Oklahoma Press. 1971.

- Uhlenbeck, C.C. *Original Blackfoot Texts: From the Southern Peigans Blackfoot Reservation Teton County Montana*. Amsterdam. 1911.

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Endnotes

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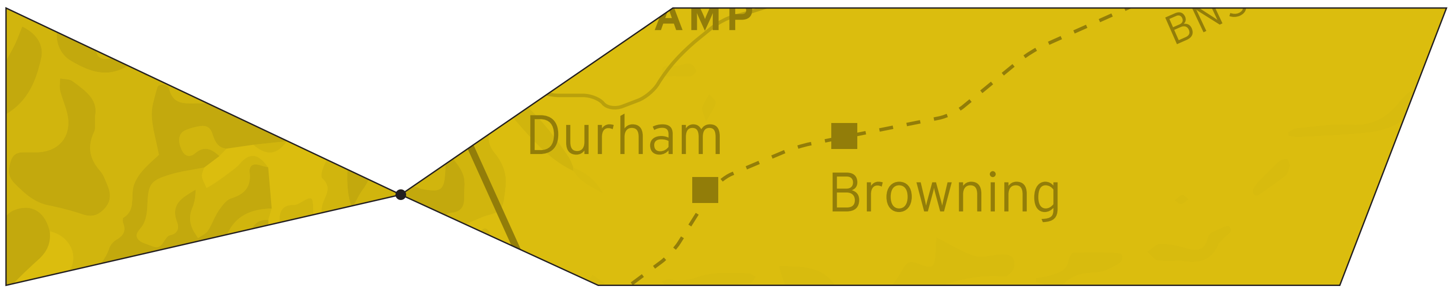

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