

# FORT BELKNAP INDIAN RESERVATION

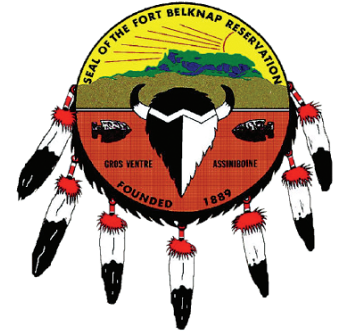
## HOME TO THE ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' AND NAKODA PEOPLE

(Commonly referred to as the Fort Belknap Gros Ventre and Fort Belknap Assiniboine Tribes)

### Location

The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is located in north-central Montana about forty (40) miles from the Canadian border. The reservation takes pride in the fact that despite individual allotments given to eligible tribal members in 1921 ninety-seven percent (97%) of the 697,617 acres encompassing the reservation remains in tribal ownership. The reservation is about 40 miles long and 25 miles wide, with the Milk River forming the northern boundary; the Little Rocky Mountains, called the “Fur Caps” by the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ', are along the southern boundary, some 40 miles to the south. Blaine County is the non-tribal jurisdiction that overlaps most of the reservation; a small additional portion lies in Phillips County. The Fort Belknap Indian Community also owns 8,037 acres of fee patent land outside the reservation’s boundaries.

The northern portion of the Reservation is mainly glacial plains and alluvial bottomlands. The southern portion consists of hilly grasslands, the rugged terrain of the Missouri River Breaks and two principal mountain ranges, the Bear’s Paw and the Little Rockies, where some peaks are as high as 6,000 feet.



### History

Established in 1888, the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation was named after William W. Belknap, who was Secretary of War under President Ulysses S. Grant. One of many federal officials of dubious reputation to become involved in Indian country, Belknap was later impeached for corruption. Nowadays, Fort Belknap is the home of two Native nations. One is the Gros Ventre Tribe, who also refer to themselves as the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ', pronounced Āh āā nēē nin, which means the White Clay People. The other tribe is the Assiniboine, or Nakoda, also spelled Nakota, meaning the “Generous Ones” or “the Friendly People”. The two tribes have unique histories and cultures, but were placed together on the reservation by the federal government.

Before learning about the two tribes’ histories, we must remember that before the reservation era, which settled the first peoples of this land into fixed domiciles, they had full and complex lives. A people might have formed and dissolved allegiances with other groups and might have migrated across long distances in order to ensure that its members were safe and content. A large number of related people might have traveled together. Or, they may have broken up into smaller family or clan subsets, with the result that different parts of the same tribe had unique experiences and today have distinct oral histories.

As settlers began to sweep across the continent, the U.S. government made treaties with American Indians. In some cases—notably at Fort Belknap—mistranslated names, mistaken identities, misconstrued agreements, and the packing of more than one tribe onto one reservation caused lasting confusion. Today’s Fort Belknap residents deal continually with these misunderstandings in their ongoing effort to create a better life for their people and a brighter future for their children.

The historical record contains little about the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' before the earliest known contact with Europeans in 1754. The ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' are related to the Algonquian-speaking Arapaho and Cheyenne people historically and culturally. Early French fur traders first contacted them between the north and south forks of the Saskatchewan River, in the present-day Canadian province of Saskatchewan.

The misunderstandings arose right away. The French communicated with Native people via a universal Plains Sign Talk. The ᑕᑕ'ᑕᑕ'niinen' were known by various forms of the Cree term pawistikowiniwak, or “People of the Rapids,” which references an area they inhabited between the North and South branches of the Saskatchewan River, which have frequent rapids on both sides of the area between the forks. When the ᑕᑕ'ᑕᑕ'niinen' indicated the sign for “waterfall”—a downward waving motion of the hands at waist level—the French traders mistakenly thought they were indicating a big belly. As a consequence, they called them “Gros Ventre,” meaning “large stomach” in French.

Although the Fort Belknap Gros Ventres are often confused with the Hidatsa, who were also called Gros Ventres, or Gros Ventres of the Missouri, on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota, this name for the Hidatsa also came from a misinterpretation of sign language. The sign for the Hidatsa's chest tattoos is a similar gesture on the torso. The two tribes may have been associated in late prehistoric or early protohistoric times; however, their languages are unrelated, and they have separate membership rolls and property rights.

The Nakoda were originally a part of an eastern branch of the Sioux called the Yanktonai. During the 17th century, the Nakoda split off from the Yanktonai and migrated westward onto the northern Plains. In their travels, they acquired a new name as well—and again, it appears that it was thanks to outsiders. Some historians say that “Assiniboine” is a name the Chippewas/Ojibwas gave the Nakoda, meaning “ones who cook with stones,” “stone boilers,” or perhaps even “stone enemy.”



Today, multiple Nakoda bands live in the United States (that is in Montana) and in Canada and are considered separate tribes by the government of the country in which they reside. They all speak similar dialects of the same Siouan language, but each tribe has a separate tribal membership roll and property rights. Montana has two Nakoda tribes, one on the Fort Belknap Reservation and another on the Fort Peck Reservation.

The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is what remains of the vast territory established by the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty. It was the first treaty to define multi-tribe boundaries between the Missouri River and the Continental Divide. A tract identified as the “Blackfeet Territory,” for the Blackfeet Nation, included north-central and most of eastern Montana. For the purposes of this Treaty, the Blackfeet Nation was an alliance of tribes comprised of the Blackfeet themselves, as well as what are now the Fort Belknap Gros Ventres, the Piegan, and the Blood tribes. (Note: This is a subset of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which is a larger grouping of allies.) Another tract was identified as the “Assiniboine Territory,” which included a small part of eastern Montana and parts of western North Dakota. The total land base reserved for the “Blackfeet Nation” combined with that reserved for the “Assiniboine Nation” exceeded 22 million acres.

In 1855, the United States negotiated an additional treaty with the Blackfeet Nation, again describing it as composed of the Blackfeet, Gros Ventres, Piegans, and Bloods. The accord was an attempt to stop hostilities among tribes of the area. It affected a large group: each of those tribes had an estimated population of between 2,600 and 3,000 members at that time. They agreed to live in perpetual peace and friendship with each other and “Crows, Assiniboins, Crees, Snakes, Blackfeet, San Arcs, and Aunce-pa-pas band of Sioux and all other neighboring nations and tribes of Indians”. The 1855 Treaty also identified two small areas inside the “Blackfeet Territory” as “common hunting grounds.” This meant that the Assiniboine would be allowed to hunt in a small area in the northeastern part of the territory and tribes west of the continental divide would be allowed to hunt in a small area in southwestern part of the territory.





The search for food determined exactly where they lived. At one point, a decline in the numbers of buffalo in the Montana area pushed the tribe north, where they began hunting caribou. Later, they decided to return south to their old hunting range. Upon their return, which took place during winter, they crossed a large body of frozen water. The ice broke, killing many and leaving some on one side and some on the other side of the water. No one knows exactly when this happened, as oral history provides no exact dates. The two ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ groups never reunited. Eventually bands would split, and the group moving farther east and then south would later become known as the Northern Arapaho. By then the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ controlled a vast area in present-day Montana and in Canada between branches of the Saskatchewan River. Their territory was expanded after pushing the Snake Indians, also known as Shoshoni, south of the Yellowstone River.

The group in north central Montana had its first awareness of non-Indians in the early 1800s, when they observed what one writer believes could have been members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The non-Indians killed a buffalo with a rifle, the first time this group of ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ saw guns, which they called “thundersticks.” Lewis and Clark Expedition members often thought they were close to finding the “Atsina,” as they called them. If this was a fact, little did members of that expedition know that they were themselves being watched by the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ from a distance, as they crossed that portion of ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ territory. Later, according to some historians, Lewis mistakenly identified a group of Indians the expedition skirmished with in 1806 as Minnetarees of the Prairie, an alternate name for the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ; instead, say some historians, these were Blackfeet. No, say other historians, they really were Atsina, or ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ. Who knows? Many of the identifications in those days were done on the run (or in the midst of a pitched battle) by foreigners who had little experience of the first peoples of this continent and how they might be distinguished one from another. Perhaps the expedition skirmished with a combination of the two groups, who were allied at the time. One Lewis and Clark map identifies a band of “Paunch” Indians, yet another name for the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ on the White River near the Black Hills in South Dakota.



Much of the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ oral history, customs, religious beliefs, and language were lost over the last century and a quarter. This occurred after the near extinction of the tribe by war and disease, primarily smallpox. As a result of these catastrophes, many survivors converted to Catholicism and embraced a European-style education as an ongoing survival mechanism. However, remnants of the ancient culture still exist, and the oral stories place the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ on this planet since the time of creation. At that time, the Great Mystery gave them a sacred pipe, which they still possess, along with instructions on its use. For centuries, spirituality directed the daily lives of the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ, who received guidance via the pipe and other sacred items and ceremonies.

Some historians question the accuracy of the oral stories and unpublished documents because they do not conform to scholars' own histories and their theories. However, one must remember that most of the oral history predates any written documents. Very important as well: the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ were a large and complex group, and historians may erroneously assume that the experience of one fragment was the experience of all. Not only were there two major subgroups, but the Montana division was itself subdivided into twelve bands. According to Dan Sleeping Bear in 1934, when he was in his mid-seventies, “So large were the ᠳᠣᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ camps, that the crier rode through the village on horseback with his news, announcements, and proclamations, and one man might not know another of his nation except for the sign of his clan.” These bands often went in different directions under their own leadership, either by themselves or along with other bands. As a result, each part of the tribe had myriad unique experiences that were not documented or known by other groups.

Nevertheless, some events were documented after the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' first encountered the French traders in Canada in the mid-1700s. At this time, they were allied with some of the Blackfoot tribes, and with them controlled a vast territory in present-day Alberta and Saskatchewan. As stated earlier, there was a miscommunication about the tribe's name based on the sign for "rapids".

More mistaken and/or mistranslated names include: Gros Ventres of the Prairie, Gros Ventres of Montana, Rapid Indians, Waterfall Indians, Falls Indians, Willow Indians, Minnetarees of the Prairie, Minnetarees of Fort de Prairie, Pahkee Indians, Paunch Indians, and Atsina. Aside from Gros Ventre the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' are most commonly referred to as Atsina a name given them by their one time ally the Piegan after parting company on unfriendly terms. According to the Piegan Institute, the contemporary Piegan name for the Gros Ventre is "Assinee," meaning "big bellies," which is similar to a falsely translated label applied by the French. The Arapaho brethren to the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' call them "Hitúněna" which in the original translation was honorable name. It meant "the person that takes" in reference to a shared creation story of "first man" who took mud from the turtle to make land at the time of creation. Some contemporary translations today change the meaning of the word to "beggars" or "hunger."

The ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' made their presence known on the Plains. In 1751, Canadian military man and explorer Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre tried to find a route to the Pacific Ocean for the French. He remarked that the Gros Ventres were "an insurmountable obstacle" to his plans. From December 1 to 16, 1772, the Hudson's Bay Company's Matthew Cockings observed the Gros Ventres. He reported that they excel "not only at hunting buffalo, but in all their actions." He saw them as similar to Europeans and "cleanly in clothing and food."

In 1781, a devastating smallpox epidemic reached the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ', killing an estimated two-thirds of the tribe, who were camped in the area of the South Saskatchewan River. The devastation wrought by smallpox epidemics meant many tribes formed or maintained alliances to protect themselves and their territory. In 1812, John C. Luttig, a writer for the Missouri Fur Company, reported an alliance among the Blackfeet, the Piegans, the Bloods, and the Gros Ventres. He also called the Gros Ventres "the most relentlessly hostile tribe ever encountered by the whites in any part of the west, if not in any part of America." The trapper always understood that to meet with one of these Indians meant an instant and deadly fight. "These Indians were well formed physically, fond of athletic sports, excellent horsemen, and great hunters."

The early 1800s saw much travel and splintering and reunions of the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ'. The Montana portion of the tribe remained closely allied with the Arapaho, some even joining them from 1818 to 1823, then returning to the main group of ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ', which was camped in the area of the Milk and Missouri Rivers. A small band of Assiniboine joined the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' during this time and agreed to always live in peace with the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ'. The ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' in Canada destroyed several forts there, with the last one in 1826 being Chesterfield House, at present-day Empress, Alberta, after which they went south to briefly reunite with the Montana group. During the period of this reunion, German explorer and naturalist Prince Alexander Philipp Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied and the artist Karl Bodmer met the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' along the Missouri River, where Bodmer painted portraits of several tribal members.

Soon after, some ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' went south with the Arapaho and skirmished with the Mexican Army and others in the Cimarron area over an approximately five-year period. In 1829, they were hit by smallpox, losing about half of their people. After an argument with the Arapaho they had to battle their way back north. Along the way they got into what was rated as one of the worst encounters of Indians and traders in the west at a place called Pierre's Hole. By 1833, it is believed that most of the tribe was reunited. When smallpox hit area tribes again in the 1830s, it wreaked havoc on other tribes but not the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' who may have acquired immunity to that strain of smallpox during the 1829 epidemic.

By the time the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty was signed, the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' had expanded their territory to the Yellowstone River. They sometimes were enemies of neighboring tribes like the Crows, Piegans, and Blackfeet, and at other times were allies. Non-Indians were amazed at how quickly these tribes could reconcile after serious fights—or decide they were enemies, as after the 1855 peace treaty among the tribes and the United States. In 1868, the U.S. government established a trading post called Fort Browning near the mouth of People's Creek on the Milk River. The ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ', some Nakoda, and some Sioux received rations there. Soon though, the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' were nearly wiped out by a smallpox epidemic, during which ninety percent (90%) of their numbers died. The ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' claim this strain of the disease was intentionally given to them when some white men gave them a package and told them to call their people together as the “Great White Father” had sent it as a gift. Following the white men's instructions the package was opened several days after they left the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ'. To the amazement of the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' there was only pieces of cloth in the package which they passed around curiously viewing. Several days' later people began dying. After the epidemic the remaining headmen advised their people to break up into smaller groups and scatter to avoid being totally destroyed. Small pockets of ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' could be found throughout Montana and other areas of the northwest until most were brought back to Fort Belknap during the allotment era which began in 1921.

A legend had become reality, according to Dan Sleeping Bear. Handed down by generations of medicine men, the tale told of a time when a mighty people with fair hair and white skin would destroy the red man. Coming from the east, the story said, these strangers would take the Indian's land, kill their buffalo, and force them to adopt new ways of living. The writings of spirit men or little people, which could be read by only those greatly favored, also told of these things. Examples of these petroglyphs can be seen at Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park in southern Alberta, just north of the Sweetgrass Hills. Up the Missouri River and across the prairies the strangers came with their teams of oxen and great creaking wagons. They took without asking and doled out whisky, said Sleeping Bear. Wise old men and women, who had watched the white man since first he came among the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' shook their heads and mumbled the warning of the old legend.

Both smallpox and the destruction of the great buffalo herds caused great suffering. The last wild herd of buffalo in the continental United States roamed the lush Milk River valley, between the Bear's Paw Mountains and the Fur Caps. This area is smack in the middle of the area then—and now—occupied by the ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' and some Nakoda. Many called it the last frontier, which drew outsiders, both Indian and non-Indian alike, wanting to hold on to a dying way of life. The ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ', by now generally called the Gros Ventres, came to believe themselves accursed and deserted by their “man above.” The old tale of the conquering white race was retold, and the old men and women concluded that the destruction of the Indian was imminent if he did not abandon the ways of the teachings of their forefathers and cling fast to the strange new people.

“We had to overcome overwhelming odds just to be here today” are words that have been repeated by many ᠳᠠᠪᠠᠨᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ' elders over the years.

### **Brief history of the Assiniboine “Nakoda” People**

In historic times, the Assiniboine people were assumed to be of the Yanktonai Sioux, although popular with modern historians of the time. The westward movement of the ancient tribes, bands and sub-bands of the Nakoda Peoples began in the 16-17th centuries, and the records throughout history reflect contradictory perspectives of not only Indian people, but also of the Europeans. The Assiniboine name, “one who cooks with stone” is a name given to them from their Cree allies. The Cree migrated and traded with the Assiniboine. European explorers used the name “Stoney” for the Assiniboine due to their technique of using fire-heated rocks to boil and cook meat.

“Pierre Jean Desmet, a French Jesuit missionary of the early 19th century, stated that the Assiniboine were once members of the Yanktonai band of Dakota (Sioux). The oral tradition of the Assiniboine, however, refutes that claim. According to oral history in all Assiniboine tribal bands, their origins are Algonquian. Scholars of Assiniboine descent have been involved in research in the area since the mid 1970s.

According to Wamakashka Doba Inazhi-Chief, Red Bottom Band of the Assiniboines

Our traditional history tells of our life east of the Great Lakes and our slow migration west as the non-Indian peoples settled the eastern seaboard. While we lived in the region east of the Great Lakes, our oral history tells us, some of our people met with white men who had red hair all over their faces and rode in boats that had cloth and furs hanging above them. These white men took some of our more adventurous people back to their country over a great body of water. After a few years some of our people were brought back. They said they were treated extremely well by these white men and taught many of their ways of life. Other stories tell of some of our people living where it was always snow. It is also told that some of our far-ranging people found a place where it is always summer and how the summer was finally brought to where our people lived (History of the Assiniboine People from the Oral Tradition - Nakodabi--The Assiniboine People 1992).

Nakoda dialect and language was similar to the Dakota and it was from this fact that many have assumed that they must be from the Sioux family stock. The Nakoda language spoken in Canada is significantly different than the one spoken in the United States. Most linguists consider them two distinct languages, Stoney (Canadian) and Assiniboine (American.) In recent times, the resurgence of the language usage among the young has increased. Both tribal colleges at Fort Belknap and Fort Peck offer Nakoda Language courses in the hopes of reviving the language before it disappears.

The buffalo was the main resource of food, and as the tribal population grew, they gradually migrated out of the eastern woodlands and boundary waters of Minnesota, Ontario, and the Missouri River Country. They moved north westerly toward Lake Winnipeg and began trading with both the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company near the Rocky Mountain Front.

During this time, there were two bands of Assiniboines living in the area, the woodland tribes of the north, and the Southern Band, who hunted and trapped furs for trade with the French and English. The Assiniboine, acting as intermediaries, traded goods back and forth with the Europeans, Ojibway and Cree Nations around the great lakes region. They traded for knives, tools, guns, powder, and bullets. There were three trade zones established (local, middle men, indirect) where the Assiniboine and western Cree trapped and transported furs. The southern plains Nations, who had less contact with Europeans - until later in the 18th, early 19th Centuries, remained without European contact until the time of the horse culture, which came to the Assiniboine.

Around 1818, The London Convention, enacted between the United States (U.S.) and Canadian (CA.) Governments established the 49th parallel. This treaty separated the two bands, Upper Assiniboine tribes and the Lower plains tribes. Families still roamed freely to visit relatives and to hunt and trap. Due to conflicts between these two countries, the Ashburton Treaty (1842) resolved the problems. Not wanting to go to war, Queen Victoria and President Tyler came to an agreement for the border between their countries. This disregarded the way of life of Indigenous Nations that had freely traversed over the now invisible line, separating families from each other and endangering cultural integrity.

Misguided Federal Indian Policy during this time period resulted in what is sometimes referred to as the American Indian Holocaust. A cultural genocide occurred with attempts to exterminate cultures, religions, and languages. The history of this starts with broken treaties, the forming of reservations, disease, starvation, relocation,



assimilation, massacres, warfare, boarding schools, Christianity, loss of culture, and land. The pre reservation era transformed the Assiniboine way of life, those born on the reservation had a new culture where as the old culture was seen as an aboriginal culture. The Euro-American civilization exhibited a sense of ethnocentrism and the government wanted to expand the country with the frontier being opened to settlers and new territories being occupied.

During this time, many began to settle on the reserve and developed a dependency on agriculture, ranching, and government annuities, which were promised and often not delivered. Many of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre People perished due to inclement weather, starvation, and disease. The Assiniboine settled in the river valley area near the agency and in Lodge Pole, while the Gros Ventre lived in the Hays, Landusky, Zortman, and Agency areas. Reservation life became a reality with the slaughter of the last buffalo in the winter of 1884, and the old Nakoda economic culture was gone.

The first day of school at St. Paul's Catholic Mission was in 1866, the same day the church opened. The mission school and boarding schools were formed in an effort to stop the use of old culture and Indian languages, which were forbidden to use. Punishment for speaking Indian in the schools system was often strict. During the mid-1800s-early 1900s, the policy of "Kill the Indian, Save the Man" was another means of assimilation and the ceremonies changed over time. Feather hand-game bundles became the new means of Sundance culture when the government outlawed all ceremonies. Secret societies maintained the cultural ways, while some went north and kept the Sundance ceremonies alive until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, when traditional religious practices were re-instated for all Native nations.

## **Organizational Structure**

Prior to 1935 the historical ᠳᠤᠪᠠᠨᠠᠨᠠᠨᠠᠨ and Nakoda Tribes each managed their own affairs. In 1935 these two historical tribes adopted a Constitution and By-Laws pursuant to the Indian Reorganization Act, sometimes called the Wheeler Howard Act, on December 13, 1935. The newly adopted constitution created a tribe called the Fort Belknap Indian Community. A Federal Charter for the new tribe was adopted on August 25, 1937. This new organization would have an elected body known as the Fort Belknap Community Council. Currently the Community Council is comprised of eight (8) council members, a President, and a Vice-President. The President oversees daily administration through a Chief Administrative Officer, and the President appoints a Secretary/Treasurer.

The Community Council is also the Board of Directors for the federal corporation. There are two (2) six (6) member Treaty Committees, one for the Gros Ventre Tribe and one for the Assiniboine Tribe, elected by the membership of each respective tribe. These committees handle matters specific to the respective tribe they represent. These committee members are elected to lifetime terms.

## **Separation Of Powers**

Despite being molded after the United States Government the Fort Belknap Constitution did not contain a definite separation of powers. The Community Council has always been both the legislative and executive branches. A separate Judiciary was approved as a constitutional amendment in 2001. However, the Community Council still maintains control over the Judiciary by the appointment of judges and staff.

## **Tribal Sovereignty**

Protection of Tribal Sovereignty is always a major concern for any tribe and yet it is one of the most misunderstood concepts by many federal, state, and tribal lawmakers.

## Enrollment

Enrollment is a complex issue at Fort Belknap because multiple membership rolls and payment rolls exist making it extremely difficult to understand. When the Fort Belknap Indian Community was created as a tribe, the intent of the federal government officials was to destroy the identity of the historical ᠳᠤ'ᠪᠪ'ᠨᠢᠢᠨᠢᠨ and Nakoda and replace them with simply Fort Belknap Indians. While that concept may have worked to a certain extent through intermarriage with other tribes and non-Indians, most tribal members still identify themselves as either ᠳᠤ'ᠪᠪ'ᠨᠢᠢᠨᠢᠨ or Nakoda. In fact, identifying with one tribe or the other is on the upswing due in part to revitalization of native culture, religion, and language beginning at a younger age. Children are being taught to be proud of who they are.

## Population

Enrolled members living on/ near the Fort Belknap Reservation	4,546
Enrolled members living off the Fort Belknap Reservation	2,826
Total enrolled members - Fort Belknap Indian Community	7,402

## Land Status/Allotment

The year 1921 marked the beginning of extremely controversial times for Fort Belknap. The adoption and implementation of the Dawes Act allowed eligible individuals approved by a three (3) member commission to receive land allotments. The process determined eligibility pursuant to criteria established by the commission. To prove eligibility for an allotment each resident Indian, or their parents in the case of children, were asked a series of questions such as what tribe they belonged to, where they were born, or have they ever received rations, if so, where? These statements were written down, witnessed by adults who knew the applicant, later typed, and are on file with the local BIA office. These statements were also used for enrollment into the tribes. Many people were denied allotments for a variety of reasons. Some people who were denied appealed the commission's decision, some won their appeals and others did not. Some individuals who lost their appeals were formally adopted by a majority vote of the tribal general membership. Ill feelings still linger to this day because of actions taken during the allotment era. In addition to individuals receiving allotments, lands were reserved for various tribal uses, churches, state schools, and federal government administrative purposes. To be enrolled today one must be a descendant of a person who originally received an allotment. Despite allotments to individuals 97% of the Fort Belknap's land base remains in Indian ownership.

## Fort Belknap Indian Community Land Buy-Back Program

The Cobell Settlement was formally approved on November 24, 2012. Part of the settlement provided for a \$1.9 billion Trust Land Consolidation Fund. The settlement charges the U.S. Department of the Interior with the responsibility to use the percentage of funds designated for the Fort Belknap reservation at Fair Market Value (FMV), fractional interests in allotted lands that individuals are willing to sell. Acquired interests will remain in trust or restricted status through transfer of tribes.

The Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations implements the land consolidation of the Cobell Settlement. The Program's goal is to create cultural, residential, governmental, and economic opportunities by consolidating fractioned lands into tribal trust ownership for the benefit of tribal communities.

## **Medical Facilities**

Through PL 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination and Assistance Act the Community Council contracts many services historically carried out by the Indian Health Service. Some of the major medical programs contracted are:

- Public Health Nursing
- Community Health Representatives
- Health Education
- Chemical Dependency
- Family Planning

## **Diabetes Prevention And Education Programs**

The Community Council also receives funding from the State of Montana Department of Health and Human Services for other health related programs such as Tobacco Prevention, Healthy Heart Project, Women, Infants and Children Program, and Personal Care Assistance Program.

The Indian Health Service operates two health facilities on the reservation with most of the contracted programs housed in those facilities. The Little River Health Center, a four bed Infirmary with a full service clinic, is located on the northern end of the reservation at Fort Belknap Agency. The Eagle Child Health facility, a full service clinic, is located in Hays on the southern end of the reservation. Recruitment of professional staff is an on-going problem due to the remoteness of the facilities.

## **Schools**

There are four public schools on or near the reservation. Some students attend Indian boarding schools as well. All schools offer varying levels of Native American culture, history, and language. The Community Council has provided pre-school services with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services since 1965. Currently there are Head Start services provided in three locations on the reservation, Lodge Pole, Hays, and Fort Belknap Agency.

## **Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC)**

ANC is an important and vital part of the Fort Belknap Reservation and surrounding area. ANC operates autonomously from the Fort Belknap Indian Community and is governed by a six (6) member Board of Directors appointed by the Fort Belknap Community Council. ANC is a two year accredited college with a staff of 58 serving an annual average of 143 both Indian and non-Indian students residing within commuting distance on and off the reservation.

KGVA Radio Station 88.1 FM is “the buckskin voice of the Aaniiih Nakoda Nations” and was established in 1996 and is licensed through the college. KGVA is an educational, non-commercial, public radio station serving the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and surrounding communities. KGVA’s mission is to “Get the Message Out,” by serving as a vital communications tool for the Native American and non-Native American communities within the station’s service area. The radio station provides programming that fulfills the cultural, educational, and entertainment needs of the community.

Tribal colleges are chartered by American Indian Nations. ANC recognizes the urgency of tribal language preservation and/or revitalization with its important role to the tribal nation cultures and social wellbeing. The White Clay language at one point had become nearly extinct. In 2001 ANC was among the first tribal colleges to open an American Indian language immersion school which is housed on the college campus. The school focuses on the White Clay people language (ᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠬᠤᠨᠠᠵᠤ) and relies heavily on Native knowledge bases and Native

ways of knowing and learning while incorporating non-native ways of learning to offer the students the best of both worlds and become positive and successful individuals.

## **Employment And Income**

The scarcity of jobs has caused Fort Belknap to have the highest unemployment rate of all reservations in Montana soaring as high as 80% at certain times of the year. The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation also suffers from a drastic shortage of affordable housing. The Tribe, federal agencies, the college, and school districts are the largest employers. Due to the limited number of jobs available on the reservation, many tribal members must leave to provide for their families. Many move to neighboring communities; however, with the recent boom in economic activity in the Bakken many members have relocated to eastern Montana or North Dakota for higher paying jobs. Some members work at seasonal jobs such as firefighting and various construction related projects. Others are self-employed entrepreneurs mainly in agriculture or acting as guides for bird or big game hunters. While others may work for local Indian or non-Indian farmers and ranchers or local tribally owned enterprises such as Island Mountain Development Group, Fort Belknap Casino, Fort Belknap Kwik Stop, Little River Smoke House, and the Little Rockies Meat Packing Company. A Tribal Employment Rights Office monitors employers on reservation to ensure that tribal members are given employment opportunities.

## **Contemporary Issues**

The Fort Belknap Indian Community currently manages around 300-500 buffalo near Snake Butte Reservoir. On August 23, 2013, 34 genetically pure bison were released onto a 1,000 acre pasture located just south near the 18 mile marker on highway 66. The Fort Belknap Bison Program teaming with Yellowstone National Park's bison have brought the buffalo back to the plains area, and for the first time in over a century, the buffalo will roam the prairies of the reservation. The return of the buffalo signifies not only the preservation of the pure strain bison, it brings new beginnings to future generations of the Aaniiih Nakoda people.

The Fort Belknap Reservation sits on large quantities of undeveloped oil and gas reserves. As the oil boom makes its way west from the Bakken, Tribal Government and reservation residents must prepare for the time when it reaches Fort Belknap. Although economically beneficial, time and time again the social and environmental ills that follow an oil boom has proven to destroy rural communities. Advanced planning on how to deal with issues such as law enforcement, courts, medical, infrastructure, housing, environmental protection, and drug and alcohol abuse must be made.

## **Water Rights**

In 1905 a Federal Supreme Court decision commonly called the Winters Doctrine was a huge victory for Indian Country as birth was given to Reserved Indian Water Rights. This case was adjudicated on behalf of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and has withstood the test of time for over a century. Many tribes have benefitted from the Doctrine by retaining the right to water not only for agricultural purposes but for domestic and commercial use as well. Despite having won its case, Fort Belknap has encountered problems over the years actually getting the water to which it is entitled due to water shortages. Congressional Acts have forced most tribes in Montana to enter into water rights settlement agreements with the state. Although the Fort Belknap Community Council has been negotiating a settlement agreement for some 30 years, a final agreement has yet to be approved. Many members of the historical ᠳᠤᠰᠤᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ and Nakoda tribes question whether the Community Council is the proper body to be negotiating or if it is a Treaty Committee function since the foundation for the water right is a treaty right. An agreement between the United States and Canada called the International Boundary Treaty and the Blackfeet Tribe's water right complicate Fort Belknap's water right on the Milk

River because they all claim a share of the water supply. Additionally, water quality has become an issue in the negotiations due to the adverse effects of mining.

## Mining Effects

From 1979 to 1998 Pegasus Gold, a Canadian based mining company, operated the Zortman/Landusky mine in the Little Rocky Mountains. The method used was open pit mining, with the construction of cyanide heap leach pads to recover precious metals from the ore. After the company filed for bankruptcy, it departed leaving the mountains permanently scarred and an estimated \$33 million in clean up and reclamation costs. Although some reclamation work has been completed, there is still a long road to hoe. The long term health and environmental effects have yet to be measured. One thing for certain is that the water must be treated forever.

## Recreation

Throughout the scenic Little Rocky Mountains one can enjoy recreational opportunities year round. During the summer months picnicking, camping, and hiking can be enjoyed at many spots; probably the best known is Mission Canyon just south of Hays, which is a recreational site and home to the Natural Bridge, Wilson Park, Devils Kitchen, Needle Eye, Kid Curry’s Hideout and the Pow-Wow grounds for the Hays Community Pow-wow in August.

On the reservations north end Snake Butte Recreation is located seven miles south of Fort Belknap Agency. It is a high-line landmark and is known to the ᠳᠠ’ᠵᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ’ and Nakoda People as a spiritual place for vision quests and a lookout point. Adjacent to one of the buffalo pastures, Snake Butte has recreational trout fishing, fresh water spring, prairie dog hunting, shaded picnic areas around the reservoir, and hiking. The granite-like rocks of Snake Butte were mined for the Fort Peck Dam in the 1930s and played a major role in the completion of the dam in 1940. A few miles north fishing in the Milk River is available or farther east the Strike Reservoir area is available for picnics, camping, and fishing.

The Fort Belknap Fish and Game department regulates tribal and non-tribal members within the boundaries of the reservation with upland game bird, antelope, deer, elk, buffalo, and prairie dog shooting. Fishing licenses are available for purchase. Guided hunts can also be arranged from the list of licensed guides.

## Annual Festivities

The Milk River Indian Days Annual Pow-Wow celebration is in July at the Fort Belknap Agency Pow-Wow Grounds, Ft. Belknap MT. featuring traditional regalia dancing and singing contests throughout the weekend with the Annual Mosquito 1k, 3k fun run, parade, Indian relay horse racing, youth rodeo, and the ultimate warrior competition.

Hays Community Pow-Wow is held in August, the Pow-Wow grounds are located in Mission Canyon. In keeping with tradition, Hays community members, consisting of the Aaniiih Nakoda Nations, host an annual Pow-Wow. This event and gathering is a traditionally hosted celebration. Many events are scheduled such as a parade, rodeo, Indian relays, but the most important event is the traditional dancing that allows the native people the freedom of expression and socializing.

<i>Month</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Location</i>
<i>January</i>	<i>New Year’s Celebration</i>	<i>Lodgepole</i>
<i>February</i>	<i>Mid-Winter Fair</i>	<i>Fort Belknap Agency</i>
<i>June-2nd week</i>	<i>ᠳᠠ’ᠵᠠᠨᠢᠨᠢᠨ’ Sundance</i>	<i>Mid-way between Hays-Lodgepole</i>

<i>July-1st week</i>	<i>Nakoda Sundance</i>	<i>Mid-way between Hays-Lodgepole</i>
<i>July-2nd week</i>	<i>Lodgepole Pow Wow &amp; Rodeo</i>	<i>Lodgepole</i>
<i>July-4th weekend</i>	<i>Milk River Indian Days</i>	<i>Fort Belknap Agency</i>
<i>August-2nd week</i>	<i>Hays Community Pow Wow</i>	<i>Mission Canyon</i>
<i>October-2nd week</i>	<i>Chief Joseph Pow Wow</i>	<i>Fort Belknap Agency</i>
<i>November-2nd weekend</i>	<i>Veterans Pow Wow</i>	<i>Rotates to Communities</i>
<i>December</i>	<i>Christmas Pow Wow</i>	<i>Fort Belknap Agency</i>

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