Federal Food Programs, Traditional Foods and the Gros Ventre & Assiniboine Nations of the
Fort Belknap Indian Reservation

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Introduction

The Fort Belknap Reservation is home for both the Assiniboine and the Gros Ventre tribes, which have different historical backgrounds. The Assiniboine were the northern most group of the seven divisions of Yanktonai Sioux that resided in the region between the Mississippi River and Lake Superior (8). The Gros Ventre are an off-shoot of the Algonquian speaking Arapaho believed to be the northern most group of five related Arapaho tribes. The reservation was established in 1855 (8); (Figure 1). The last census (1994 lists 5,138 enrolled tribal members: 2,129 Assiniboine and 3,009 Gros Ventre. Approximately 50 percent of enrolled members live on the reservation. (8.) The location of the reservation is in central Montana, close to the Canadian border (Figure 1).

Fort Belknap Reservation contains 737,714 acres of which 223,306 acres are tribally controlled and 396,337 are allotted and are held by tribal members. Almost all the land within tribal boundaries is controlled by the tribes however the state, has nearly 19,000 acres within the reservation boundary. Only 6,000 acres are owned in fee status, and about 3,000 owned by tribal members (8).

Approximately 80 percent of the reservation reside in Blaine County, Montana, with 20 percent residing in Phillips County, Montana. Topographical extremes range from 2,300 feet along the Milk River to 5,700 feet at Antoine Butte on the southern edge of the reservation, in the Little Rockies (8).

Although the Fort Belknap tribes had developed a constitutional form of tribal government as early as 1894, they were reorganized under the Indian Reorganization Act only in 1935. In July of 1994, a new constitution was passed, changing how the Fort Belknap tribes were represented on the tribal Community Council. Today there are four representatives from three districts: one from the Lodgepole District, one from the Hays District, and two from the Fort Belknap District, representing the two tribes equally (8).

The Fort Belknap tribal budget for the fiscal year 1995 totaled $10,139,000. Approximately $7,420,000 came from federal grants and $2,719,000 from indirect revenues and trust accounts. Most of the general fund income is from grazing and dryland farming permits. An increasing amount comes from Fish and Game permits which totaled $66,753 in 1994, up from $34,722 in 1993 (8). Unlike those on some reservations in Montana, the Fort Belknap tribes have a limited natural resource inventory. Their wildlife populations, potential gas and geothermal resources, and agricultural lands only contribute to their natural resources (8).
Until the 1930's, one attempt after another to make farmers of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine failed. Attempts to get tribal members to also become ranchers through a range-management program, was started in 1930 by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The program encompassed 533,000 acres, almost the entire reservation. Farming and several irrigation projects continued to be emphasized in the 1960's despite traditional religions beliefs of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre that it is a sin to tear up the sod because the earth is a living creature. Today farmland occupies approximately 123,500 acres. The primary crops are wheat and barley, yielding an average age of 30 to 45 bushels per acre. About 50 tribal members are in farming. Even though agricultural lands within the reservation gross between $20 and $50 million, the tribes and their members realize only a tiny percent because much of the land is leased to non-Indian people (8).

Close to half a million acres of reservation lands are range and pasture. Although a good portion of this was once leased to non-Indians, a drastic change occurred during the early 1990's, and today 60 percent of the land is administered under the range permit system managed by the BIA and the tribes. Only 40 percent is administered by private lease. At least 70 percent of the range management system lands are now grazed by Indian-owned livestock, a major change from the mid-1980's when Indian livestock made up a small portion of total reservation animals (8).

Furthermore, in 1971, the Tribal Council approved reintroduction of the bison onto Fort Belknap Reservation. Currently 400 bison are now owned by the tribes. These animals produce about 200 calves each year. Acreage for the bison herd now is 10,000 acres and growing. While some bison (a dozen in 1994) are used for ceremonial celebrations, most are used to increase the size of the herd. However, some special hunting permits are issued each year. The tribes hope eventually to sell live animals to other tribes. Most importantly, the tribes hope to develop a meat processing and retail market based in Fort Belknap. It is hoped this project will become a viable for-profit enterprise (8).

The reservation holds approximately 34,000 timbered acres of Lodgepole, Ponderosa and Douglas-fir. Around the turn of the 20th century, this relatively small forest was in great demand by mining towns just south in the Little Rockies. However, by 1912 the tribes' 90 million board feet was of little value because it was so far from commercial markets. In 1936, a forest fire burned almost the entire forest in the Little Rockies, and even today reforestation needs to be completed on some 4,000 acres (8).
Unlike many reservations, Fort Belknap has a fairly comprehensive hunting ordinance that has been used to increase and manage wildlife. The tribes employ two full-time and one part-time game wardens during the hunting season. Policies are enforced and, by and large, tribal members respect the various ordinances, particularly those related to the unregulated hunting season, which runs from the first of September through December for tribal members and from the first of October through December via special permits for non-members. As a result, antelope populations increased dramatically from approximately 500 animals in 1985 to over 4,000 in 1995. In 1994, 317 antelope permits were sold, bringing in approximately $38,000 for tribal funds. Elk populations also have increased during the same period, with 51 permits sold in 1994. The whitetail deer population on the northern part of the reservation is in good condition but has endured some pressures from hunting, with 341 whitetail deer permits sold in 1994.

Fort Belknap is one of the better places in Montana to hunt sage grouse, sharptails and pheasants. The birds have excellent habitat, and tribal members rarely hunt them, all of which contributes to above-normal bird populations. While 110 bird permits were sold in 1994, only 24 of these went to tribal members.

The reservation has bentonite reserves that remain undeveloped with excellent potential for geothermal activity. Some low-quality lignite deposits have been found, but not of the quality and quantity found in coal fields elsewhere in eastern Montana. Extensive gas deposits could be found on Fort Belknap; therefore, the tribes are negotiating with gas exploration companies for exploratory drilling rights.

Perhaps the most important natural resource issue facing the Fort Belknap tribes is water rights. The 1906 Winters Doctrine, which decided a water right issue on the Milk River, established that the government is to make irrigation water available to the tribes. The state of Montana's present adjudication program, however, which has been supported by the U.S. Supreme Court, puts the rights to water from the Milk River in some doubt. Current negotiations are underway involving all users to rectify past and present misappropriation of these rights.

Historically, the economic situation on Fort Belknap has never been good. In March, 1921, an allotment plan for the reservation was put forth by the tribes and the local BIA agent, but it wasn't approved
by the Washington office of the BIA until 1924. The same year that the Merriam Report was published, Montana Senator Burton Wheeler visited the reservation in 1928. He was appalled at the poverty, malnutrition and disease, and it is reported that this visit motivated him to co-sponsor the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (8).

In spite of such dire circumstances, real attempts have been made to uplift the health and welfare of the people. A reservation-wide emphasis on improving the economic climate has been bringing positive changes. Although 15% less than in 1985, unemployment still ran at 60 percent in 1995. Over 45 percent of tribal members live below the poverty level, with an average family income in 1990 of $14,583; when compared to non-Indian residents' income in Blaine and Phillips counties, there is great disparity between the tribes' economic situation and that of their non-Indian neighbors. For example in 1990, the average family income in Blaine County was $21,347 and in Phillips County it was $26,862. The entire tribal community realizes that creating employment opportunities is the major issue facing the tribes (8).

Increases in the tourism sector of the Fort Belknap economy have been mostly from increasing sales of tribal bird and antelope hunting permits, as well as fishing and varmint permits to non-members. In 1994 this brought in as much as $66,753 to the tribes. No other tribe in Montana has such a program. Tribal members also have set up encampments for non-Indian tourists, and offer a tour program for those who wish to learn about the culture, history and present-day status of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre. Crafts and museum center at Fort Belknap along with the Kwik Stop also attract tourists on US Route 2. However, the tribes are very cautious about wholesale expansion of tourism (8).

With this background knowledge concerning the Fort Belknap Reservation and its people, this report will now focus on the earliest documented records of the Federal Government's policy of food aid on the Fort Belknap Reservation up to and including the present time. The use of Traditional Foods by our peoples will be discussed later.

The whole notion of commodities and their origin is a very contentious issue among us Indian People. Historically, commodities were used by the U.S. Government to cajole land from us and threats were used as mandatory placement of the Indian children within boarding schools (i.e., no commodities issued if children were not in these schools). But what concerns us now is the current status of these food
assistance programs. Are they meeting their objectives, and, are they having a negative or positive affect on our people?

The practice of food distribution on-site here has carried on for 101 years. However, a discussion of various treaties is necessary before understanding the present situation at Fort Belknap.

The most important purpose of many of the treaties was to extinguish Indian title to land. Typically the Indians agreed to reduce their land holdings or to move to an area less desirable for white settlement. Often Indians were compensated for their land and property by lump sum or annuity payments of money, or by payments in services and commodities (1).

W. H. Fanton, the Indian Agent at Fort Belknap in 1873, issued rations to the Gros Ventre and collected 164 ration tickets for the population of 910 persons. This marked the beginning of food distribution. One typical issuance of rations included the following: White Eagle, a Gros Ventre leader received six sacks of flour, 50 pounds of sugar, 25 pounds of coffee and seven pounds of tobacco for himself and his camp. (2.)

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1874, Article III stated:

The United States, hereby agrees to advance and expend annually, for the period of ten years after the ratification of this agreement, under direction of the Secretary of the Interior, for the Indians now attached to and receiving rations at the Fort Belknap Agency (3).

The Federal Indian policy (1870-1886) was backed by military support, which placed all Indians on to reservations. Hence, independent Indian nations were now dependent on the U.S. Government to provide Indian tribes with food and clothing rations for survival. Act July 1, 1898, ch 545, 30 Stat. 573. United States Code Service, Lawyers Edition, Titles 23 to (25) Indians, SSI-370 (4).

A more recent issue occurred on September 16, 1974 in a special meeting of the Fort Belknap Tribal Council, in which food stamps were discussed with County Commissioners. It was decided however, by County commissioners to establish a food stamp program, leaving Fort Belknap Indian Reservation with ration distribution. Further complications arose due to disparity of incomes in obtaining commodities.(5) In the Fort Belknap Indian Community, Resolution No. 22-76(1976), income level on commodities was raised:

Whereas, commodities have been furnished to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation for the purpose of supplementing the diets of Indian people, and

Whereas, commodities furnished to the reservation have been limited.
BE IT RESOLVED, that regulations for receiving commodities be raised to that of the Food Stamp regulations and be based upon income upon a month to month basis. 

The most recent resolution concerning our people and eligibility requirements for food distribution occurred in 1977. The Fort Belknap Indian Community, Resolution No. 32-77, was issued to express support for "The Indian Food Program Amendments of 1977":

WHEREAS, the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is an area marked by a high unemployment rate (64.8%), and
WHEREAS, the residents of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation are assisted greatly in their daily diets by the distribution of surplus commodities and food stamps, and
WHEREAS, on September 30, 1977, the United States Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) Will lose its 4A Authority to purchase and distribute surplus commodities, and
WHEREAS, The loss of this authority and program would be a serious blow to one third (1/3) of the residents of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in that an important dietary supplement would be taken from them, now

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED. That a copy of this resolution be sent to each member of the Montana Congressional Delegation, The United States Department of Agriculture, The Food Research and Action Center, The National Congress of American Indians and other National Organizations as may be deemed necessary.@

Results

The objectives were two fold; first, to evaluate in detail the current state of federal food programs through a survey and interviews and second to ensure that traditional methods of food gathering and preparation be made available to anyone either through education or hands on learning.

Completion of the first objective was conducted through a survey during the summer of 1999 on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. The survey would assist us in the research as to what federal food programs are currently used by Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. This was coupled with the second objective which was to determine the extent of traditional food use in the past and present years.

The first task was to design a questionnaire for both men and women. Participants over the age of 50 were asked to participate in the study (Figure 1). Oral interviews were also included as part of the overall data collected. The data was then tabulated and presented as histograms (Figures 2-6). Figure 2 (Appendix II) shows the primary food source used both in the past and present. It is interesting to note that rations played a greater role as a primary food source in years past than they do currently (at least for this group of people). The data also reflect the change from a traditional mode of obtaining food (i.e.: hunting, fishing, gathering) to one of buying store bought goods. Small gardens also featured extensively as a source
of food and have greatly diminished in present times. However, the use of some dairy products (milk and butter) has varied little over time but cheese and cottage cheese make up a large portion of the dairy products consumed today (Figure 3).

The preservation of food has also changed over time (Figure 4). With the exception of canned foods, freezers and refrigerators are today the dominant methods of preservation followed by canned and dried methods. Even the way people eat has changed somewhat through time here on the reservation. The majority of people still prefer to eat at home and with family and friends (Figure 5). Notice however, that in the past most people ate at school (Figure 5). This data reflects the fact that children from reservations were sent to boarding school and these would now be the elders in the survey. It is also interesting to note that today, fast food and convenience stores feature as places to eat, similar to off-reservation trends.

A new dimension to reservation life is the advent of the senior center. And it is here that many elders gather for comradeship and a meal together. The fuel source for cooking food has also changed dramatically but again, reflects trends seen off the reservation (Figure 6.). Electricity came to the reservation in the late 1950's and since then has become the way of food preparation.

**Other Results from Survey**

A majority of elders do not receive any type of these food programs that are available on Fort Belknap Reservation because of the Standard Household limits that are set by the USDA which include:

a) Three thousand ($3,000) dollar limit for all households with two or more members if at least one member is 60 or over.

b) One thousand seven hundred and fifty ($1,750) dollar limit for all other households including all one person households.

If you exceed these amounts you become ineligible to receive commodities during the month your resources exceed the Standard Household Limits (6).

It has come to our attention that a majority of the elders' household income exceeds this standard set by the USDA. It also depends on whether s/he is also a widow or widower. Some of the elders may receive a small income from Social Security, VA, SSI, IRA, farm lease, and/or grazing lease. Elders receiving small benefits then do not qualify for commodities and exceed the standards set forth. The most
recent data gathered from our food distribution program (October, 1998 to September, 1999) indicated that there were 786 people on the Commodity Program representing 304 families.

**Traditional Food Preparation Being Lost to Fast Foods**

The survey also indicated that traditional ways of preserving food is not being taught or handed down to the next generation. One very important aspect of the culture is traditional food. Food preservation for these tribes included the process of drying meat, vegetables and plants. This custom is now very close to being non-existent on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation.

**Indian Diet Dying Out**

The Indian diet was at one time a very nutritional diet. It consisted of lean meat (Buffalo, Deer, Antelope, and Elk). The vegetable items here were the Wild Turnip, Wild Onion, Wild Carrot, Choke Cherries, June Berries, Service Berries, Morgan Grapes and Indian Peanuts. Indians living in Montana did not have benefit of stores in years past. They depended upon their hunting skills for survival. The hunt not only produced meat for food, but hides for homes and clothing; in fact, all parts of the animals were used. When this type of food source moved, the Indians had to follow. As white people moved west, they occupied lands where Indians lived. They forcibly removed the American Indians to places that were unfamiliar or that did not allow the Indians to hunt and live in the way they had for centuries. American Indians became angry and fought back to protect the land and their way of life (5). Thus was the beginning of the Indians being moved onto the Indian Reservation in Montana.

**Food Gathering and Traditional Hunting Sites**

Current data obtained from the Fish and Game further emphasize that Fort Belknap Reservation residents are not using their traditional hunting sites. Most of these hunting sites were off the reservation in an area known today as the Charles M. Russell Wildlife Reserve, located in the Missouri Breaks south of the Little Rockies, and other areas between both the Missouri River and the current location of the Fort Belknap Reservation.

All these areas played an important aspect within the livelihood of survival for the Indians of the Fort Belknap Reservation, as they were substance rights/traditional hunting areas that were used by the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboin Tribes during the early 1920's. These same locations and others were also
mentioned earlier as food gathering sites that were used by these same peoples. (Specifics cannot be given due to a gag rule imposed by the elders).

**Elder Involvement Required to Re-educate Youth In Tribal Customs and Practices**

In order for these lost cultural traits to be reintroduced within the lives of the future generations to come, there is only one way: hands-on involvement by the younger generations themselves. The elders and the parents need to show these berry picking sites and the hunting sites to their children.

**Educate Children and Parents**

Parents need to teach traditional values to their children. They need to take the time to show them these places an explain to the children why it is so important. Elders need to pass on traditional customs and values that were handed down to them as children. These values are important to the survival of both the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine culture and language on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation.

**Conclusions**

The results from this study indicate that commodities exist on the reservation but disparity for equal distribution among groups of people is lacking. Food use and habits on the reservation are like those off reservation trends. Traditional foods are diminishing in all aspects of life except for reservation wide cultural events (i.e. pow-wows, name giving ceremonies, sweats, singing ceremonies and funerals). There is a loss of information and knowledge from the elders as we pass from one generation to another (i.e., location of traditional hunting sites, food preparation, and use of traditional herbs and plants for healing purposes).

So, from elders to their children to their grandchildren for the next seven generations education of cultural values including traditional foods, their preparation, use and location are paramount for our very survival. Although, the Federal Foods Programs remain part and parcel of the help offered to uplift the health of the people only further research will be able to determine whether these programs on our reservations have actually contributed to the demise of self sufficiency and degradation of cultural morals, and health.
APPENDIX 1

References


2. First 100 Years 1855-1955, Indian people of two tribes, the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboine, now living on the Fort Belknap Reservation.

3. Indian Reorganization Act of 1874


6. Fort Belknap Indian Community, Resolution No. 22-76. Income level on Commodities Raised.

7. Fort Belknap Indian Community, Resolution No. 32-77. To Express Support For "The Indian Food Program Amendments of 1977" Page 1 an 2.

8. Montana Indians Yesterday and Today, [link: http://www.alpaca.org/montfortbook.html] Pages 1,2,4,5,6,7,8,9,10.
Figure 1. Location of Fort Belknap Indian Reservation
Figure 3. Use of Dairy Products in Diet
Figure 4. How Food was Preserved

Number of Individuals Responding to Survey

- Dried
- Canned
- Wells
- Ice House
- Ice Box
- Root Cellar
- Creek or River
- Freezer
- Refrigerator

- Past
- Present
Figure 5. Current Eating Trends

Number of individuals over 50 responding to survey

- Home
- Friends & Family
- Restaurants
- School
- Fast Food
- Convenience Store
- Senior Centers
- At Work

Past
Present
Figure 6. Fuel Source for Food Preparation

- Number of Individuals Over 50 Responding to Survey

- Fuel Sources:
  - Open Fire
  - Wood Stove
  - Propane
  - Gas
  - Coal
  - Electrical Appliances

- Typically (Past)
- Present

- Question: Which fuel do you use to cook your meals?

- Options:
  - Wood Stove
  - Propane
  - Gas
  - Coal
  - Electrical Appliances

- How many individuals over 50 use each fuel source?
Survey Questions:
Questions 1-11 will refer to when you were a child.

1. What was your primary food source when you were a child?
   - Gardens
   - Hunting (wild game)
   - Domestic (cows, pigs, etc)
   - Bartering (trading)
   - Other: ________________________________________
   - Rations
   - Fishing
   - Gathering food (turnips, berries, etc)
   - Store (general, trading)

2. What types of dairy products did you use when you were a child?
   - Milk
   - Cheese
   - Other: ________________________________
   - Butter
   - Cottage Cheese

3. Where did you eat when you were a child?
   - Home
   - Friends and other family
   - Other: ________________
   - Restaurants
   - School

4. Did you help prepare meals when you were a child?
   - Yes
   - No

If yes, describe how: ____________________________________________________________

5. What was your favorite foods when you were a child?
   ____________________________________________________________
6. Was there enough food in your household when you were a child?
   □ Never       □ Sometimes       □ Always

7. How many meals did your family eat in a day when you were a child?
   □ 1 meal       □ 2 meals
   □ 3 meals       □ Other: __________________________

8. What was the fuel source for food preparation when you were a child?
   □ Open fire    □ Propane       □ Coal
   □ Wood Stove    □ Gas
   □ Other: __________________________

9. How was the food preserved or stored when you were a child?
   □ Dried       □ Wells            □ Ice Box
   □ Canned       □ Ice House        □ Root Cellars
   □ Creek or River       □ Other: __________________________

10. Where are the traditional hunting and food gathering sites of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine nations on the Fort Belknap Reservation?

   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________

11. Do you think your health and nutrition was better when you were a child as opposed to now?

   □ Yes       □ No

   Why or why not: ______________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
Questions 12-20 will refer to now.

12. Presently, what is your primary source of food?
   - Gardens
   - Hunting (wild game)
   - Domestic (cows, pigs, etc)
   - Bartering (trading)
   - Other: ________________________________

13. What types of dairy products do you use now?
   - Milk
   - Cheese
   - Other: ________________________________

14. Where do you eat now?
   - Home
   - Friends or other family
   - Fast Food
   - Convenience Store
   - Other: ________________________________

15. How do you decide what to eat now?
   - What kids want
   - What food is in the house
   - Plan well balanced meal
   - How much time you have
   - Other: ________________________________

16. What is your favorite food for your family now?
    ______________________________________
    ______________________________________
    ______________________________________
17. Is there enough food in your household now?

☐ Never    ☐ Sometimes    ☐ Always

18. How many meals does your family eat in a day now?

☐ 1 meal    ☐ 2 meals
☐ 3 meals
☐ Other: ____________________________

19. What is the fuel source for food preparation now?

☐ Open fire    ☐ Propane    ☐ Microwave Oven
☐ Wood Stove    ☐ Gas    ☐ Electric Range
☐ Coal
☐ Other: ____________________________

20. How is the food preserved or stored now?

☐ Dried    ☐ Wells    ☐ Freezer
☐ Canned    ☐ Ice House    ☐ Refrigerator
☐ Root Cellers    ☐ River/Creek
☐ Other: ____________________________

Comments:

Interviewer Name: ____________________________ Gender: ☐ M ☐ F Age: _______
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