

THE SPIRIT OF THE RESERVATION IS CHANGING.
THE BALANCE OF TRADITION
AND PRACTICALITY
IS BRINGING THE CULTURE TOGETHER
FULL-CIRCLE.

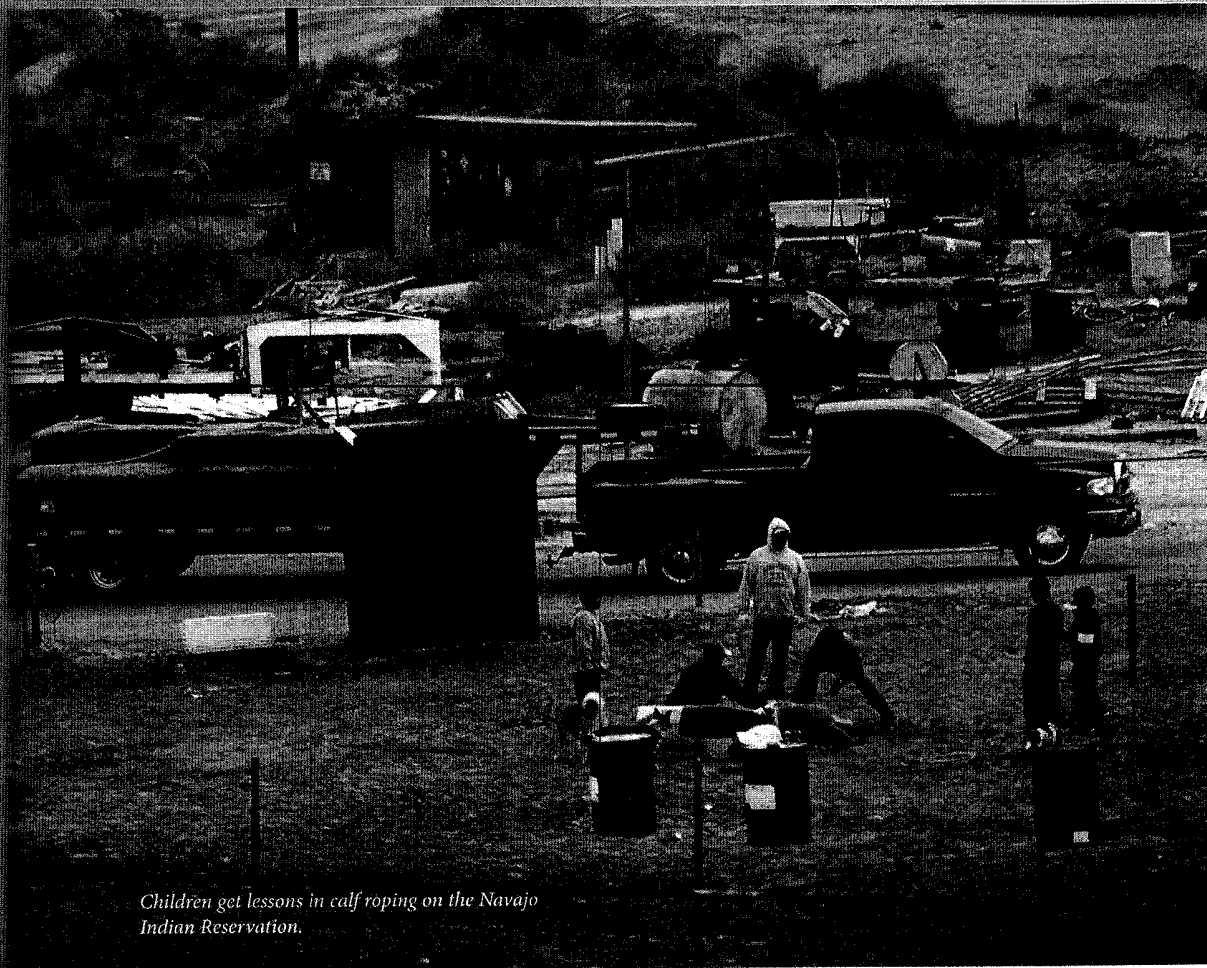
- 1 From the top of Coffee Butte in the land of the Cheyenne River Sioux, you can see 50 miles in every direction. As I circled my gaze, I could see black dots on the wide, grassy plain below. Buffalo. I picked out one herd, then another, another, and another. A herd in each of the four directions: good omen.
- 2 "Look," said Dennis Rousseau, of the tribe's Game, Fish, and Parks Department, "over there."
- 3 I followed his stare to a group of brown specks on a ridge, two miles to our east. "Wild horses," he said. "Coming our way."
- 4 I watched as perhaps a dozen animals flowed toward us down the slope, smooth as rushing water. They were half a mile away, led by a brown stallion, head up, alert to any danger. Sure enough, distant as we were, the stallion caught wind of us. He stopped abruptly on top of a hill, stared, then turned, driving the horses before him, out of sight as quick as the flash of a hawk's wing.
- 5 Wild horses are back on the reservation after an absence of 140 years, trucked in from Nevada, where they were being shot at and killed by poachers only a few years ago. Their return, like seeing buffalo in all directions, was enough to stir the blood of at least one old East Coast Indian: me. For the first time in generations, "the buffalo, the elk, and the mustang are all back on the reservation," said Dennis, lowering his binoculars. "One of our holy men told me that means something really good is going to happen."
- 6 I'd come to Cheyenne River looking for something good: the same spirit of revival and hope that I'd heard about in Indian communities across the United States, from the stone-cold canyons of Manhattan to the quietest hogan in the desert Southwest. In a thousand small ways, that revival—cultural, political, economic, spiritual—may wind up transforming the lives of 4.1 million Native Americans, the vast majority of whom today live somewhere besides a reservation.

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Adapted from "Indian: Scenes from a Renaissance" by Joseph Bruchac: National Geographic Magazine, September 2004.

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- 7 And yet, as I'd driven across South Dakota to get here, I'd expected this place to be different. Confined to some of the driest, most unforgiving real estate in North America, Sioux reservations on the Great Plains are among the poorest in the country. Just south of Cheyenne River, people on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation live on a third of what the average American earns and are three times as likely to be jobless. They also commit suicide twice as often. In this part of America, whole landscapes seem raw with the memory of what went on here in the late 19th century. This is the land of the Custer campaigns and the Ghost Dance, where Lakota Sioux resisted the coming of the whites and the loss of their sacred lands with every beat of their hearts. Sitting Bull's grave is out here.
- 8 Approaching Cheyenne River after sundown, I hit the search button on the radio and landed on the biggest station around—KLND, Indian owned and operated—just in time to catch a dedication. "For all you lovebirds out there, whether you're snaggin', shackin', or married," said the deejay. "Here's Lil' Kim!" If nothing else, young Americans of all colors have music in common: 50 Cent and Eminem are just as popular with Indians as they are with other American kids. Short hair, tattoos, and baggy pants are everywhere you look. Even adult men who used to wear shoulder-length hair have gone to the buzz cut, in a quiet revolt against Indian stereotypes.
- 9 A while later, at my motel, I tuned in channel 30 on cable and saw an ad from Emmanuel Red Bear—who also goes by the Lakota name of Tatanka Iyotake, the same name as his great-great-grandfather, Sitting Bull—making it known that he is a certified Lakota language instructor, an experienced emcee for powwows, honorings, and giveaways, and is also available for suicide counseling and gang awareness workshops. It was a vision of hope that made me sit up in my chair.
- 10 The next day I caught another glimpse of hope, this time in black and white. On the wall of Dennis Rousseau's office hangs one of those reservation maps I've grown familiar with over the years, showing the checkerboard pattern of lands once reserved for Indians. Today about half of the original 2.8-million-acre Cheyenne River reservation is in tribal hands; the rest was expropriated by federal allotment acts between 1887 and 1934 and sold to whites. However, the tribe is making a huge investment in its future by seeking a federal loan to buy back 22,140 acres, including the grazing land where their buffalo herd now roams.
- 11 With more than 3,000 animals, the Cheyenne River herd is the largest tribally owned buffalo herd in America, and one of the best managed. Tribal biologists, for example, plant microchips in young buffalo to identify and monitor each animal from a command post in Rousseau's office. Some of the animals are sold commercially, but most of the meat, which passes USDA inspection, goes to schools and other tribal programs such as the Elderly Nutrition Center, part of an effort to reintroduce buffalo meat, which is leaner than beef, as a staple of the reservation diet.
- 12 Long-term, says Dennis, the goal is to reestablish buffalo culture on the reservation, with benefits both practical and spiritual. "The buffalo, which is sacred, is still providing for us by giving us a paycheck and putting food on the table," said Dennis. "Nature put the buffalo on this Earth for a reason. So I guess it's come full circle."



Children get lessons in calf roping on the Navajo Indian Reservation.

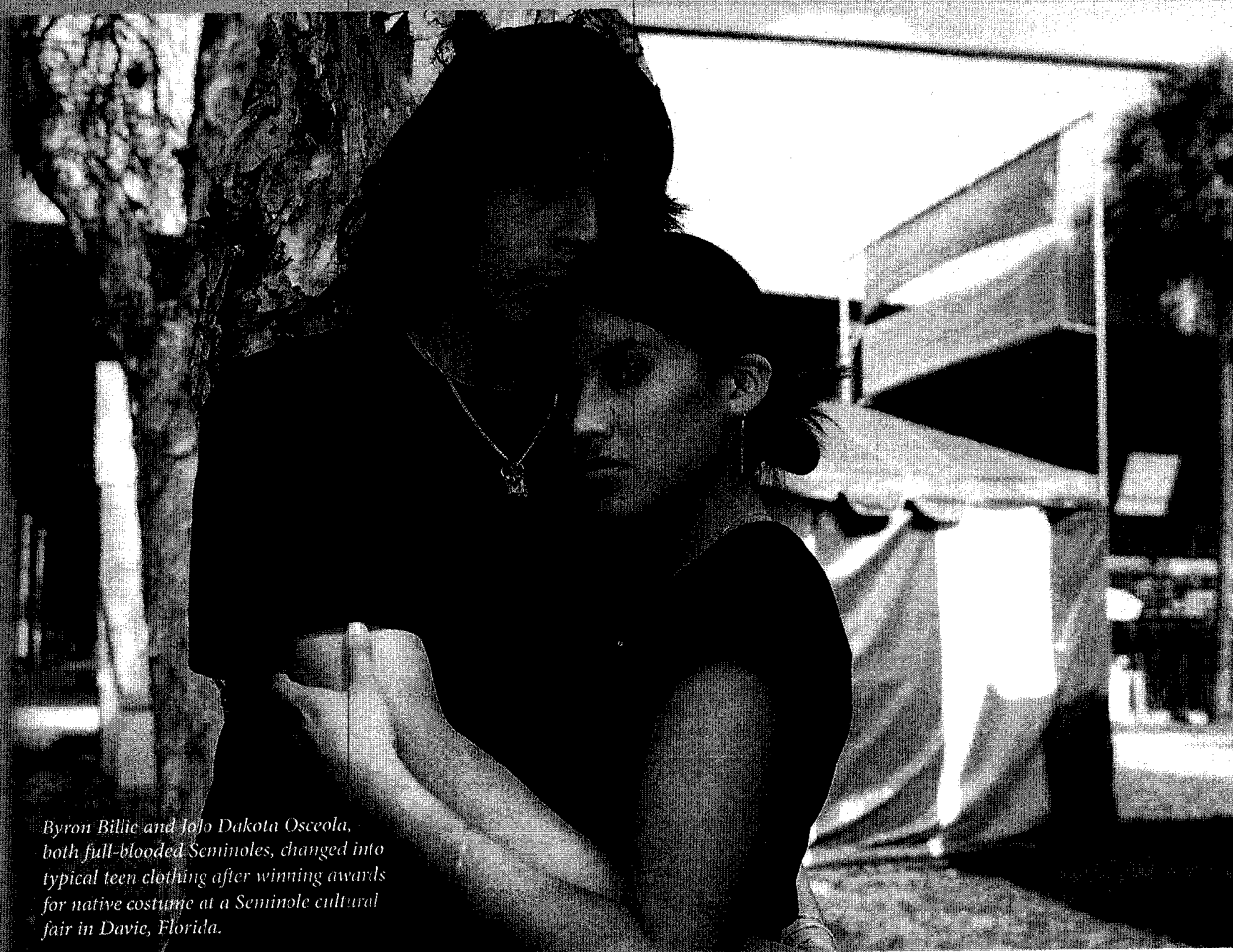
- 13 Full circle. That's an apt metaphor for the state of Native America in September 2004. For more than a century, Indians in the United States survived in the white man's shadow by humbling themselves, becoming invisible, learning to survive, if barely, on handouts from the federal government. Inevitably, the fabric of Indian communities, their dignity and identity, were left as shredded and thin as the few remnant buffalo herds on the Great Plains, ghostly reminders of a rich and glorious past.
- 14 Today that situation is changing as Indians across the U.S. exert new influence over their lives and their communities. One of the most visible signs of change is what some call the "new buffalo"—the casino, which for better or worse has become Indian country's most potent symbol of economic empowerment, mostly due to the success, and notoriety, of gaming tribes like the Mashantucket Pequot in Connecticut, whose Foxwoods Resort Casino will gross more than a billion dollars this year.
- 15 Other tribes have followed the Pequot and opened casinos of their own: Hon-Dah and Apache Gold in Arizona, Feather Falls in California, Cherokee Casino in Oklahoma. Still, only 40 percent of federally recognized tribes run gaming operations, and not all Indian casinos earn substantial income. Even those that do are subject to the oversight of nontribal bureaucracies at both the state and federal levels. Many Indians also question the long-term viability of gaming, which depends, like a fad, on the tastes of a fickle public.

- 16 With this uncertain future in mind, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin has directed casino profits toward tribal development and used them to buy new land, pave roads, and even build an elementary school in the shape of a huge turtle, revered by the Oneida. "A generation ago our children went to school in old clothes and were taunted by the kids who were better off," says Bobbi Webster, the tribe's public relations director. "Today those other kids are jealous."
- 17 The Oneida are also diversifying their portfolio. With three other tribes, they founded Four Fires, a business consortium designed to explore opportunities beyond gaming. Their first joint venture is a 43-million-dollar hotel near the National Museum of the American Indian, opening this month in Washington, D.C. Embodying the renaissance in Indian country, this museum, which houses one of the world's largest collections of Indian art and culture, was funded in part by millions of dollars in casino revenues, donated by tribes like the Pequot and Oneida.
- 18 The Chippewa of northern Minnesota went a different route, investing half a million dollars of their casino profits to revitalize the mainstay of their traditional life: wild rice, an annual aquatic grass that grows only a few places in the world. One of them, happily, is Nett Lake on the Bois Forte Chippewa reservation—the largest contiguous wild rice lake in the world, where native people have been gathering *manoomin* since the time of the ancestors.
- 19 Historically, the rice harvest brought this community together, kept it intact, and provided a major source of income. However, in the 1970s and '80s outside growers with new methods drove the price to a fraction of what the Indians were getting. Bois Forte rice production also waned as Nett Lake became overgrown with reeds and other vegetation. That changed in 2003, when the tribal council decided to allow motorized barges and cutting equipment, paid for by casino money, onto the sacred lake to clear out the sedges, bulrushes, and water lilies that had created bogs and choked off the flow of water needed to grow rice.
- 20 To see how the restoration was going, I paddled out onto Nett Lake one morning with Ron Boshey and his 32-year-old son, Barry Day. Once we were clear of the shore, Ron pulled a cigarette from his pocket and stripped off the paper. Then he balled the tobacco in his hand and sprinkled it over the water as he spoke a few words of Chippewa.
- 21 "Just a little offering to the Great Spirit," he explained. "Asking for a good harvest."
- 22 Leaning hard into his pole, Barry sent us cruising silently into the nearest rice bed, which rippled like a wheat field in our passing wake. Then he steered us into a patch where the rice grains were ripe brown. Ron reached out with a pair of slender wooden sticks, called knockers, which he used to strip rice into the bottom of the canoe, moving his arms with the fluid grace of a tai chi master. Soon the canoe was filled with long quills of rice. I noticed other boats moving in the reeds nearby, and I felt as if we'd all hit the jackpot.
- 23 I was on a train clattering south along the Hudson River, heading toward a place as Indian as anywhere in the United States: New York City. Famously traded to (or stolen by) the Dutch in 1626, New York today is home to more than 85,000 Native Americans. About 85 percent of Indians in the United States now live off the reservation, and every large city in the U.S. has its own Indian community. This is partly due to a government relocation program, begun in 1952, that sent thousands of Indians around the country in search of work.

- 24 Brad Bonaparte is one of these urban Indians, a 42-year-old Mohawk artist and ironworker whose father and grandfather walked the high steel with wrenches and welding torches, making the city's skyline. Every workday he puts on a brown hard hat bearing the insignia of an eagle feather, a potent symbol of blessing and protection worn by many Mohawk ironworkers.
- 25 Brad remembers admiring the World Trade Center from his apartment in Jersey City. "I used to see those towers at night, and always thought how cool it would be to have the job of changing the lightbulbs on the antenna." After the towers came down on September 11, 2001, Brad was one of the many Mohawk who worked to clear the debris and search for remains, putting in 12-hour days for three and a half months. And like everyone else working in the ruins, Brad's crew soon carried burdens heavier than concrete and steel.
- 26 "Every kind of priest was there, from the Catholics to the Buddhists, but there was no one for us Indians. One day we heard there was a tobacco burning ceremony a few blocks away, at the New York branch of the National Museum of the American Indian, so we all just walked off the job and went there." It helped. A few days later Brad's crew found the radio tower he'd dreamed about. "I ended up standing on it," he says, "but not in the way I thought."
- 27 For Brad and many thousands of other Indians, Native identity is a growing source of strength that helps them cope with the mainstream America that flows all around them. Nevertheless, it can also be a source of turmoil. I speak from personal experience: Like many Native Americans today, my heritage is mixed. My mother was Abenaki, my father was Slovak, and it didn't really dawn on me that I was Indian until I was in my teens. Even then, it took a long time for my own mother to accept that I was the first of my family in three generations to go "public," to seek out relatives and elders who could teach me the stories and language my Abenaki grandfather never shared with me. For a while my mother referred to me as, "My son, the Indian," until my younger sister Margaret asked, "But Mom, what does that make you and me?"
- 28 Good question. Such confusion, often laced with self-hatred, is surprisingly widespread, even in communities where Native blood predominates. "Are you proud to be Lakota?" I heard a Sioux man ask a six-year-old on Pine Ridge Reservation, in South Dakota. "Nuh-uh, I'm not a Indian," the little boy said before running away.
- 29 That anxiety, like so much that impedes Native Americans, is a legacy of U.S. government policies. For half a century the tone of Indian education was set by government boarding schools such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, founded in 1879 by Richard Henry Pratt, a U.S. Army officer whose philosophy was "Kill the Indian and save the man." Schools like Carlisle removed Indian kids from their families at an early age; some were kept until they were adults. If they spoke their native languages, they were severely punished. No wonder, then, that today surprisingly few Indians speak their native tongue or know much about their own traditional culture.
- 30 Tom Porter is an elder of the Mohawk Nation living in upstate New York whose grandfather and great-grandfather both attended the Carlisle School. He remembers the gray-faced men he knew as a child: "When they came home, they were just like a computer that has no feelings." He never heard his grandfather speak a word of Mohawk, one of the Iroquoian languages.

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- 31 By 1997 about 5 percent of Iroquois still spoke their native tongue; of those, most speakers were in their 70s and 80s. Concerned that the Mohawk were on the verge of losing their language altogether, Porter initiated what he calls a “Carlisle School in reverse” to jump-start his own personal Indian renaissance in a new Mohawk community. Called Kanatsiohareke (meaning “place of the clean pot”), Porter’s community offers several two-week immersion courses in Mohawk language each summer, taught by fluent speakers.
- 32 The results, though modest, are measurable. Forty or more students take the courses every summer, including several dozen or so who have become fluent enough in Mohawk to speak at ceremonial occasions. One day as I watched a language class, I noticed that one of the instructors, Bonnie Jane Maracle—whose Indian name is Iehnhontonkwaw—looked younger than most of her students. “I’m one of the 2002 graduates,” she said, beaming. “A few years ago I could barely talk Mohawk, but now I’ve learned enough to teach the Mohawk phonics class.”
- 33 The Cherokee Nation, with tribal headquarters in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, also offers language immersion classes to help preserve Cherokee culture. The courses are based on a syllabary developed by the Cherokee’s peripatetic genius, Sequoyah, in the early 19th century that helped the Cherokee to become the most literate of Indian nations, with its own newspapers and schools. The Cherokee also developed political skills that they sharpened in the 1830s, as leaders such as Chief John Ross lobbied Congress, in vain, against the forced removal of 16,000 Cherokee from tribal homelands in the southeast U.S., culminating in the infamous Trail of Tears.
- 34 Today, in a clear sign of renewal, the Cherokee are again showing their gift for cultural and political sophistication—a balance of tradition and practicality that has helped them endure the near-death experience of their expulsion to Oklahoma, the periodic landgrabs and neglect of the U.S. government, and a litany of other injustices, from a lack of potable water to anti-Indian demagoguery in Congress.
- 35 Led by Principal Chief Chad Smith, the Cherokee Nation runs a dynamic lobbying program, with a full-time office in Washington that deals with government’s convoluted bureaucracies—ranging from Congress, which writes the federal laws governing relations with Indian tribes, to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which administers U.S. policy. Smith himself spends a lot of time in Washington calling on legislators and federal agencies, and notes that the American Indian experience seems to run in cycles—“adversity, survival, adaptation, and occasional prosperity—over and over.”
- 36 I looked for signs of Indian renewal all over this country, and I found them, but I kept coming back to buffalo. One buffalo in particular. I saw him only once, in South Dakota months ago, but he’s with me still, like a recurring dream.
- 37 Dennis Rousseau and I were out in Sioux country, where Sitting Bull led his band of survivors toward a vision that only he could see. Just before sunset Dennis and I decided to drive out in search of the buffalo herd one more time, just for the fun of it.
- 38 As soon as we left the main road, we were surrounded by prairie dogs. Their burrows dotted the landscape on both sides of us, their quick whistles raised



Byron Billie and JoJo Dakota Osceola, both full-blooded Seminoles, changed into typical teen clothing after winning awards for native costume at a Seminole cultural fair in Davie, Florida.

the alarm from hill to hill. A round head poked up out of one burrow, swiveled toward us, ducked out of sight. A burrowing owl materialized, followed by the wide wings of a rust-colored hawk. Both were hunting for prairie dogs. The hawk passed; a meadowlark popped up from the grass and flew in the opposite direction. It was as if I'd traveled back 200 years, to a time before the slaughter, the plows, the heavy hooves of cattle.

39 Then a wind kicked up, blowing dust across the grass. For a moment the land looked like a yellow ocean rippled by waves.

40 Dennis nodded. "The buffalo will be coming down here into that wind," he said.

41 "Facing into the storm?"

42 "Cattle," Dennis said, "just let the storm push them. But not buffalo. They know there's an end to the storm, so they go into it."

43 "Like Sitting Bull did," I said.

44 "That's right," Dennis said. "That's right."

45 Soon we saw a solitary bull, head down, pushing forward against the weight of the wind. We followed him over a small rise and found ourselves in the midst of hundreds of buffalo. Young bulls, calves, yearlings, cows. They were peaceful and fully alive, charged with a power that seemed to flow from the old, enduring earth itself. Dennis took this in, gave me a look.

46 "The wonders," he said, "of buffalo."

(continued)