

Return of an Indian heritage

The heritage of the Omaha Indian Tribe is the lifeblood of its people. The following story depicts how this northeastern Nebraska tribe is trying to rebuild its culture in an effort to strengthen the dignity of Omaha Indians and improve the world in which they live.

Macy, Neb. — Outside a dry goods store sits an old man, looking at life before him.

His wide nose bends like a fishhook, marking a dark face that is as weathered as the faded red bench he has taken to observe the cold autumn day.

The old man wears a green canvas coat and pants. A hat covers his white hair. He is sheltered by a porch roof that slants down from the store's front onto four wooden posts.

Next to the dry goods store is a worn building. A white metal sign hangs above its doorway: Car-lu Trading Post. Through eyes that have sunk with age, the old man watches the people who walk past him and go into the building.

An Omaha Indian, the old man is part of a people who see their heritage dying in a non-Indian world.

The Omaha Indian is not a proud man, says Dennis Hastings, a member of the Omaha Tribe. The Omaha has lost much of his dignity and with it, his desire to know his culture, Hastings says.

The erosion of the Omaha Indian's culture goes deeper than a forgotten tribal song. The alcoholic Indian, the unemployed Indian, the uneducated Indian — in some part, each is a symptom of a withering Omaha heritage.

The young Indian people have other things to do than listen to an old tale about their tribe. They don't care about their language or traditions. Today when an elder dies, he takes part of our culture with him.

A nearly completed survey conducted by the Omaha, Winnebago and Santee Sioux tribes indicates the plight of some 1,800 Omahas living on the Omaha Indian Reservation in northeastern Nebraska.

UNEMPLOYMENT: For the Omaha, the rate is 81 percent compared to 4.2 percent for others in Nebraska. The yearly income for four-fifths of the tribe is less than \$7,000, while the statewide average in 1980 was \$10,600. Of the Indians who do work, almost all are employed by the U.S. government.

EDUCATION: More than 60 percent of Omaha Indians don't graduate from high school, while fewer than 20 percent of Nebraskans fail to do so. Of those Indians who do receive their diplomas, only 10 percent go on to higher education.

MIGRATION: Indians 14 to 35 years old — a 21-year span — constitute 44 percent of the people living on the reservation. Indians 36 to 60 years old — a 24-year span — constitute less than 23 percent of the Omahas at the reservation. Of the tribe's 3,000 members, two-fifths have left the reservation.

ALCOHOLISM: Other reports show the severity of alcoholism among Omaha Indians. During 1982, there were 20 deaths attributed to alcohol at the Omaha reservation compared to 22 Nebraskans who died of alcoholism in 1983. Of the 1,600 arrests made by the Omaha Tribal Police Department in 1982, 92 percent involved alcohol. Alcoholism, either directly or indirectly, affects 78 percent of all Omaha families.

The Macy Alcohol Center has 250 Omahas listed for alcohol-related problems. Each month the center admits about three new people for alcohol abuse.

