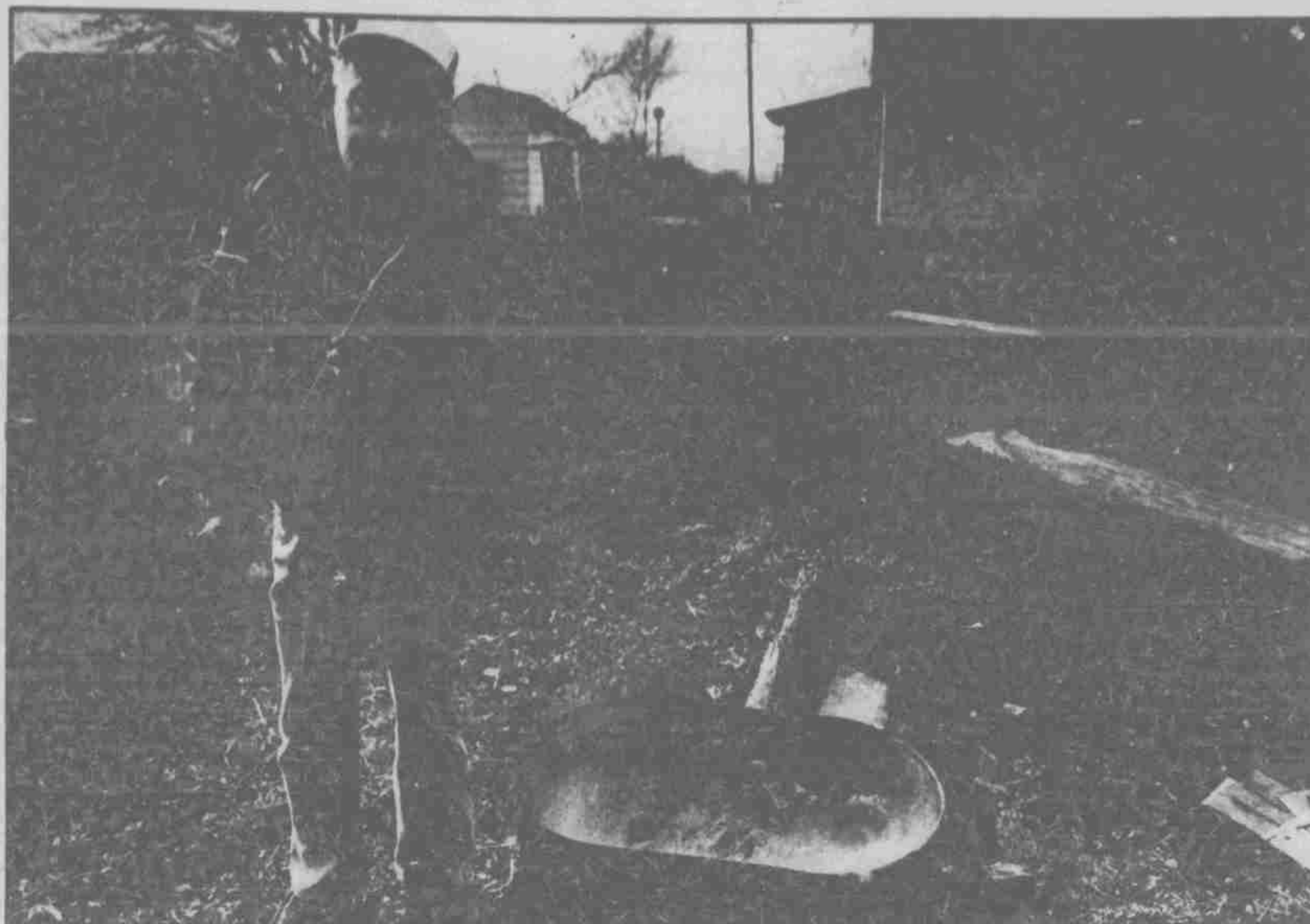
Clockwise from opposite page: Hoover Harlan, an Omaha Indian, returns to the past in his tribal dress. Wilson Lyons looks at a stick which broke while he stirred a pot of boiling beef that was to be served at a traditional dance later in the day. Dennis Hastings stands before an earth lodge which he hopes will remind the Omaha people of a prouder time in their tribe's history. No Knife, an Omaha chief, marks a dying Indian heritage.

Photos by David Creamer



The traditions of the Omaha Indians are key to their survival, tribal leaders say. The tribe's values, the importance of family, its nguage, religion and ceremonies are the ties at unite its people, the leaders say.

Indians must regain a sense of themself and eir past, says Ward Miller, chairman of the maha Tribal Council. If the Omahas fail to do his, Miller insists, they don't have the foundation solve their economic and social problems.

Using culture and dignity to resolve the mahas' economic woes and to stop or at least low down their social destruction is a path the ribe is beginning only now to take. This decision ould lead Omaha Indians into dead end. Or orse, head them the wrong way.

But Omahas don't think they have anything to ose. It has to be better than what they have now, hey contend.

The unraveling of the threads of the Omaha ulture has many in the tribe concerned.

"There is no written history of the Omaha ribe, everything is verbal," says Eddie Cline, a 9-year-old member of the tribe. "Every elder in he village is a walking historian. If you want to earn some aspect of the tribe, then you listen to he elders talking.

"But the young Indian people have other hings to do than listen to an old tale about their ribe. They don't care about their language or raditions. Today, when an elder dies, he takes part of our culture with him."

Interest in maintaining the Omaha heritage, however, is not held solely by older Omaha Indians.

Dan Webster, 25, and a member of the tribe, says it is the responsibility of his generation to carry on the Omaha's traditions.

"We have to make up our mind that we are going to keep our culture because I see it going out the door and if we don't grab a hold of it, we're going to lose it," Webster says.

The Omaha Indian Reservation is 250 square miles of rolling prairie and tree-lined creek beds. It is bordered on the west by a pair of Chicago-St. Paul Railroad tracks. To the east is the Missouri River which, according to treaties between Omaha Indians and the U.S. government, the tribe owns to mid-stream.

In early October the reservation is golden in corn. But nearly 80 percent of the land belongs to the white man. Omaha Indians own 14,000 acres. The Omaha Tribe owns 15,000 acres. Indians farm less than one-seventh of what they own. The rest is leased.

The village of Macy, home for most Omaha Indians, sits alone in the northern reaches of the reservation. In the village, rows of one- and two-story houses stand battered below the surrounding bluffs. Except for color, the houses are the same.

Macy shows other signs of deterioration. Broken roads run past its buildings. A stray dog pokes at some cans and paper that litter the ditches trailing the roads.

There is a gas station in the village. Leaning on some rusting cars, a few Omahas talk. Across the street is a cafe that has four stools before its counter. Around the corner and up the street is the brick tribal hall.

Lemuel Arnie Harlan, secretary of the Omaha Tribal Council, says that after years of being poor, Omaha Indians feel helpless. The Omahas must end their living in a welfare society, Harlan says, and again contribute to their tribe and heritage.

Harlan says Omahas must utilize their land in building an economic base. In pursuit of this objective, a three-year program recently has been set up at the Nebraska Indian Community College at Macy to train Omahas in agriculture.

Tribal leaders hope that through the program and through federal government loans to buy machinery, seed and other supplies, more Indians will farm their land.

But currently there is no industry on the reservation. Omahas must leave the tribe and their culture and try to assimilate into the non-Indian world if they hope to improve their economic condition.

"Indians want to participate in the culture, but they have to face up to economic reality," says Ward Cline, a 31-year-old member of the tribe. "We have to learn to go out in the white man's structure and get a job. To me that was the biggest obstacle that I had to and still am going through now."

Like many Omahas, Cline left the reservation at one time. But he came back for the reason most of the others return — off the reservation it is not possible for an Omaha to be an Indian.

A graduate of anthropology from the University of California-Berkeley, Hastings says the pressure to assimilate and the resulting break down of the Omahas' culture is rooted in the past.

When traders entered Nebraska in the early 1800s, they introduced new economic means (the rifle, horse and tools) and social ways (alcohol) that were accepted by the tribe, Hastings says. As nature and animals were swept aside by the white man's progress, he says, the Omahas' culture started to vanish because the alignment the tribe had with nature was being attacked.

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The Omaha Indians were not alone. Other plains Indian tribes had to change their economic and social ways to make room for the white man. But while the altering of their cultures was at first a social restructuring that the tribes could either accept or resist, it later became something in which they had no decision.

As late as the 1920s there were state and federal laws restricting tribes and their language, Hastings says. Indians were punished and sometimes jailed, he says, for practicing traditions in the villages or speaking their language in reservation schools.

"It was a government policy which thought that if you take the Indian out of the man, then you civilize him," Hastings says. "And in that progression of consistency that went on, the tribe for several generations looked at its culture with fear."

Webster Robbins, a Cherokee Indian who is a professor of education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, says that despite attempts to force the Indian into the white man's culture, tribes hung onto bits and pieces of their heritage.

There is now a recognition, Robbins says, that Indian culture, whatever is left of it, must be used to help tribes maintain themselves.

During the last few years there has been an effort among tribes to rebuild their cultures. The movement has advanced slowly.

But Wallace Coffey, executive director of the Nebraskan Indian Commission, says there has been a strong resurgence of identity by Indians.

Indians are starting to ask themselves, "Why am I supposed to be proud of being Indian?" said Coffey, a Comanche. To answer this question, he says, Indians have to realize they must go back to their heritage.

Hastings says the first step in this cultural renaissance is discussing openly how Indians feel about themselves and their traditions — something the Omaha Tribe finally has begun to do.

"We have to start admitting some things are right and some things are wrong," Robbins says. "And we can't be looking at the white man saying, 'You guys did it all.' There has to be some acceptance by the Indian that he did some of it, too. The toughest decisions will be when somebody has to admit they're wrong or did it wrong."

The collapse of the Indian family is a major cause behind the erosion of tribal culture. Where once there was a father and mother teaching their children the tribe's language and history are now, in many cases, a father and mother drunk.

Or, in other cases, no one at all.

Hastings says Omaha Indians must put the family unit back together. Parents and other community leaders must act as strong and positive role models, he says, if younger Indians are to have a better philosophy of themselves and gain a greater respect for their heritage.

Eddie Cline remembers how the medicine man once was a leader honored by the tribe.

"It was back in the '30s, the dust bowl days," Cline says. "It didn't rain here for a long time. There was an old man who had a lot of strong medicine. And the tribe had their summer ceremony.

"So here comes the old man out of a teepee next to the arena. People were standing around the teepee, and I went over there. And here was this old man and he had a white sheet around him. He said, 'Rain is coming soon. I don't want you to be afraid. It will be all right.'

"He's telling us he is going to make it rain. And the tribe gave him some tobacco and he smoked it and prayed. He had a strong, loud voice. The people were standing there listening. It was like he was talking to God.

"Pretty soon we see the clouds coming fast. The thunder and the lightning. The old man had the white sheet that had blood all over it from the ceremony. And it rained."

Cline says there are no medicine men left in the Omaha Tribe.

In an attempt to keep the Omaha Indian's traditions from permanently disappearing and in an effort to bring the tribe closer to its heritage, an authentic 1800 Omaha village is being built a short distance from Macy.

The village is part of a reenactment of the Omaha culture during that time. The tribe's life, its work, language, songs and dances will be depicted in an eight-segment program filmed next summer by the Nebraska Educational Television Network for elementary curriculum.

Hastings says the entire Omaha Tribe will be involved in the project.

In the early 1800s, the Omaha culture was at its highest, Hastings says. Through the project, Hastings says, he wants to bring the thinking of today's Omaha Indians back to the era.

The village gives Omaha Indians the opportunity to heal themselves, he says, because it washes away the 180-odd years of bad times and gives Omahas something positive to grasp.

After years of seeing its heritage fade, tribal leaders say, the Omaha Indian Tribe is working to preserve its past and build upon its future. Omahas take this road knowing the stakes are high.

If rebuilding the tribe's culture succeeds in creating a greater sense of dignity in Omaha Indians, leaders say, they then may have the motivation to solve some of their economic and social puzzles.

Omahas have everything to gain in this decision. On the Omaha Indian Reservation, it is evident to them that decades of government policies designed to help Omahas have not.

On a hill overlooking the village of Macy is a marker. In silver letters it reads: "This was the homeland of the Omaha Tribe long before settlers came to the Great Plains . . . Today, the Omaha people continue to live on their traditional homeland where their ancestors farmed, hunted, and are buried."

In the village below, the hollow beat of a leather Indian drum, the rise and fall of the drummers' voices, the dancing of the "warriors" wearing long white and brown eagle feathers in their black hair affirm the strength of the Omaha culture.

This traditional ceremony also hints that the dignity and pride of the Omaha Indian — those going against the wind or current — has not died.

— Matthew Okerlund