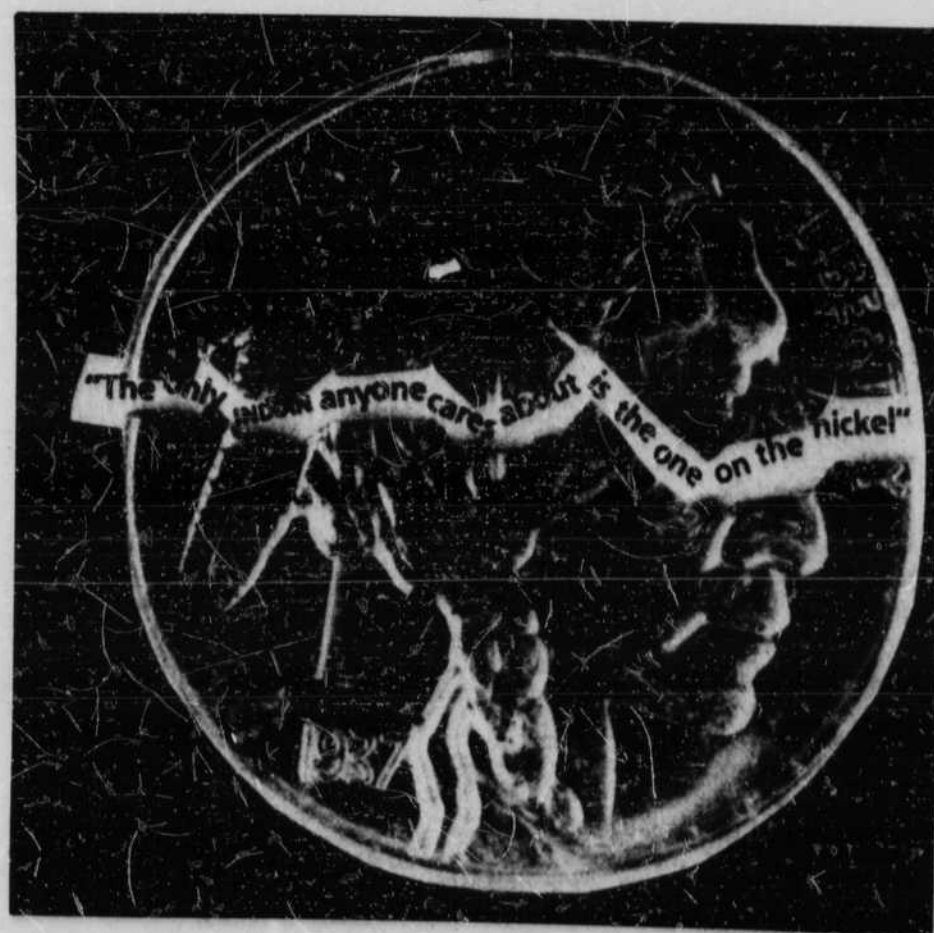


John Bruce/Daily Nebraskan

# A place to call home



Story by Lee Rood  
Photos by Butch Ireland

## Indian leaders face challenges to better life on reservations

**J**ust outside of Center, Nebr., Highway 13 heading north toward South Dakota ends and curves west. The smooth, flat highway continues north until it changes into a worn stretch of road winding around hills that seem to appear from nowhere.

There are no signs telling drivers that they are approaching the Santee Sioux Indian reservation, only subtle hints.

Government upkeep of the road seems to stop at Indian territory. Businesses are few, compared to surrounding areas. Freshly painted houses, new buildings and streets mix with other run-down buildings and dilapidated areas.

The tribal headquarters and school are busy with activity, but the streets are empty and quiet.

**T**he reservation is not like the surrounding rural communities, where homes, people and their way of life seem to blend. The reservation sends a message of conflict.

A minority of active, new tribal leaders, who many say have spawned a resurgence of hope for the future, struggle against a mostly frustrated, silent or apathetic majority.

Innovative projects have helped put a "new face" on the reservation schools and health and work incentive programs, but financing is limited and qualified help is sparse.

The Santee reservation is changing. So are Nebraska's two other federally recognized reservations, the Omaha in Macy and its neighbor the Winnebago about 2 1/2 hours from Lincoln.

Leaders say the challenges and problems facing the communities must be met. Populations on the reservation have been slowly rising in recent years and new incentives have re-inspired American Indians to fight for a better way of life on the reservations.

The Indian Relocation Act passed during Dwight Eisenhower's administration was an attempt to "mainstream" Indian people, according to Barry Blackhawk, public relations director for the Winnebago tribe.

**B**lackhawk said the act was responsible for many Indians leaving reservations during the 50s and 60s until the act was repealed. Since then, Blackhawk said, many American Indians have returned to their homes along with others who left seeking job opportunities or higher education.

The Self Determination and Indian Educa-

tion Act of 1968, public law 93-638, has given Indian people on reservations "control of their own fate," said Stephen Provost, administrative assistant of the Nebraska Indian Commission.

Provost said PL 93-638 provided tribes with the ability to contract and use federal monies directly instead of having to go through the government.

Despite these advantages, economic and social changes are hindered by the inescapable roadblocks the Indian people face daily.

**W**hile each reservation is different, leaders say they face similar problems. Generations of poverty, poor health care, unemployment, lack of opportunity and assistance is common on all three reservations.

Individual problems on the reservations are "chain-linked" to other problems, the leaders said. To improve all of the problems, they said, plans need to be developed to encompass all of the factors involved.

Along with Rick Thomas, administrative assistant for the Santee Tribe of Nebraska, many leaders agree that alcoholism is among the most serious problems on the reservations because it is an important factor in determining the success of the other aspects of life: family, education, employment and health.

A recent report by the Indian Health Service shows that 99.9 percent of all American Indians are affected or effected by substance abuse. A vast majority of the abuse is alcohol abuse, Thomas said.

"Eighty five percent of youth from 6th through 12th grades are using or experiencing substances, primarily alcohol," Thomas said.

**T**homas, who was hired by the Santee tribal government to deal with substance abuse in January 1988, said he has developed a comprehensive health curriculum for the community to deal not only with alcoholism, but the factors that drive the people to drink in the first place.

The curriculum is based on "meology" — the study of self, Thomas said, and provides a coping mechanism to promote self-esteem and self-motivation.

Thomas said he has also unified all the separate entities on the reservation and formed a Crisis Intervention Task Force to deal with alcoholism through education, law enforcement, social and health services.

Similar alcohol prevention programs are being used or formulated on the Omaha and

Winnebago reservations.

Many people on the reservations drink alcohol because of the "psychological hangover" of the past, Blackhawk said.

"The despair, hopelessness and powerlessness," from the way the American Indian has been treated is a "tribal memory" and many drink to escape it, Blackhawk said.

Thomas said Indians drink to escape past oppression.

**P**roblems with "fire water," as it was once called, have been reported as far back as 1837, Thomas said. And some Indian families have experienced six to eight generations of abuse.

"They (white people) gave us alcohol, but they didn't teach us how to use it," Thomas said. American Indians have learned to drink until they get drunk, he said.

When more people go through alcohol awareness programs and learn the impacts of alcoholism on the other facets of life, then other problems can be addressed, according to Richard Kitto, a member of the Nebraska Indian Commission.

People need to be able to reduce the level of drinking and drug abuse on the reservations to a point where other projects can be successfully started, he said. At that point, he said, other economic development programs could be synchronized with substance abuse programs.

Many people say that without sober people and leaders, attempts toward growth would be moot. Others say people need to be given reasons to stop drinking.

**I**n order to give people a sense of self-worth and incentives to avoid alcohol a buse, something must be done about chronic unemployment and lack of economic opportunity on the reservations, according to Charles Trimble, former executive director of the National Congress of American Indians.

"An awful lot of people wouldn't have to turn to whatever peace or fantasy they find in alcohol" if they had jobs and if they "... could break free of the strangle hold of colonial bureaucracy," Trimble said.

Trimble, who now owns his own developing business for Indian reservations, said the biggest economic problem facing the reservations is growing out of their past dependency on the federal government.

"People need jobs and want jobs, but the prolonged state of dependency has had an adverse effect," he said.

Tribes also face a huge risk when they attempt to invest in economic development, he said.

**L**and is often "checker boarded" or split between privately owned land and tribal land. Much of the land owned by individual Indians has been sold or leased to the government. Because of this, it is difficult to farm large areas, Kitto said.

Tribes can't use tribal assets as collateral when trying to secure money for development and because most Indians do not own their own land or homes, they have no access to capital or equity, he said.

Any loans that are extended to the reservations are usually backed by the federal government, but when the government pays the bank, the debt accrues to the tribe, he said.

Every time a plan for economic development is proposed, the tribe is asked to go into debt, Trimble said.

"The tribe will take the hit," he said. Tribes need help with the technical and planning aspects of development, as well as financial assistance, in order to avoid economic failures, he said.

**K**itto, who is also executive development director for the Santee tribe, said people on reservations face other problems when trying to build the economy as well.

There are no lending institutions on the reservations, Kitto said, so much of the money spent on the reservation doesn't go back into the community.

Most of the grant money for development on reservations comes from the federal government, he said.

"Grants are very competitive," he said. So many times, smaller tribes, such as the Santee, don't have the money to compete with larger or richer tribes for grant writers, even though their need might be greater.

"You don't have the revenue to find good writers to reflect the needs of the community," he said.

Once a plan has been developed, many times the biggest roadblock facing its implementation is red tape, Kitto said.

"The tribes are developing their own bureaucracies from contracts with the Bureau of Indian Affairs," Kitto said.

"Whenever a tribe wants to do something, it has to consult a number of agencies," he said.

See RESERVATION on 8

Upper left: Richard Lincoln, Winnebago, relaxes against a wall on main street in Winnebago. Lower left: A replica of an Indian head coin stands posted on a wall in Barry Blackhawk's office. Blackhawk is the director of public relations at the Winnebago reservation.